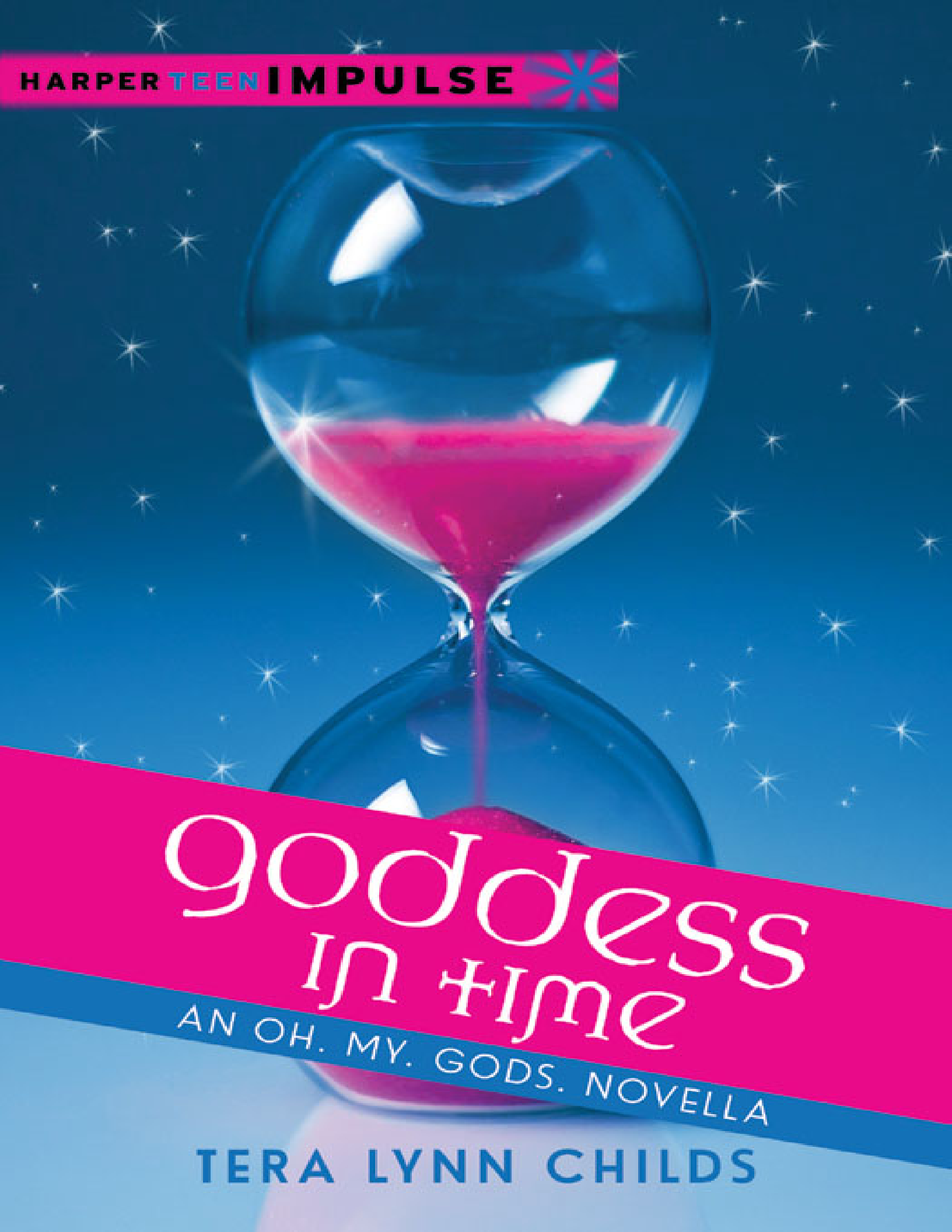
HARPER TEEN IMPULSE



goddess in time

AN OH. MY. GODS. NOVELLA

TERA LYNN CHILDS

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KT Katherine Tegen Books
An Imprint of HarperCollins Publishers

The Twelve*
Dynamotheos Powers

AEROKINESIS—The ability to control and move air and wind.
AUTOPORTATION—The ability to move oneself to a different location through nonphysical means.
CORPOPROMOTION—The ability to use the body to its fullest extent.
CORPOPROTECTION—The ability to protect oneself from harm, whether seen or unseen.
HYDROKINESIS—The ability to control and move liquids.
NEOFACTION—The ability to create an object out of nothing.
PHOTOMORPHOSIS—The ability to control light and fire.
PSYCHODICTATION—The ability to communicate, whether in words, feelings, or other senses, telepathically with another hematheos.
PSYCHOSPECTION—The ability to read the thoughts and emotions of others.
TELEKINESIS—The ability to move objects through nonphysical means.
VISIOCRYPTION—The ability to hide, mask, or cloak an object.
VISIOMUTATION—The ability to change the appearance of an object.

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When it comes to using *dynamotheos* powers, there are three unbreakable rules.

1. Don’t use them against other students at the Academy, the ridiculously cliquish private school for *hematheos*—descendants of the gods—where I am currently entombed.
2. Don’t use them to succeed in the *nothos*—nondescendant—*human*—world.
3. And, under absolutely no circumstances can you use them to travel through time.

Most people are frightened off by the consequences. The prospect of spending an eternity in the Olympic dungeons—or, if the gods are feeling particularly softhearted (insert eye-rolling sarcasm here), a flat-out smoting—is enough to keep the average *hematheos* from stepping over the line.

If you’d met me a week ago, I would have told you I’d never break those rules. Okay, I might have severely bent the first one on occasion because, seriously, some of the *theo*brats at my school deserve a little thunderbolt to the backside every once in a while. But I definitely don’t need to use my powers to get by in the real world. And the power of time travel . . . that’s just a fairy tale.

There are twelve powers, ranging from the ability to control the wind *(aerokinesis)* to the ability to change the appearance of something *(visiomutation).* Twelve powers. That’s it.

Well, at least I thought so. But that was before. Before the trip to the secret archives. Before I found out the mysterious thirteenth power of time travel was full-blown reality. Before I realized what might be possible—what might be undone. Before.

Nothing’s been the same since.

And right now, I’m about to shatter rule number three.

1

I probably shouldn't have taken the book. Burn that—I *know* I shouldn't have taken the book. Mrs. Philipoulos is pretty cool for a descendant of revenge goddess Nemesis, as long as you don't mess with her library books. If she had seen me stuff one in my bag she'd be in serious fits. Instant detention for at least a year.

But when you're in the top secret archives of Olympus in the top secret second basement of the top secret school for the descendants of the Greek gods, on a tiny island in the Aegean that the rest of the world believes to be uninhabited, and a book starts glowing as you walk by, you kind of have to pay attention. It would have been practically negligent of me to ignore it.

I almost passed right by. I was only in the archives to help my friend Phoebe find the transcript of her dad's trial, but she was several steps ahead of me. The dusty burgundy cover didn't exactly stand out among shelf after shelf of musty, old, leather-bound books. Except for the Olympic records, which include files from forever right up until the present, nothing in the archive is less than a hundred years old. In other words, it blended like ice in the Arctic.

As I got close, though, the faded lettering on the spine glowed. Commanded my attention. I couldn't help but read the words formed by the light-etched script.

The Art and Science of Chronoportation

No author's name. No publisher's mark or call number or any writing beyond the title on the spine. Nothing to indicate it might even be listed in the admin-only section of the digital catalog.

I pulled the volume from the shelf, shoved it into my messenger bag, and pretended like nothing out of the ordinary had just happened.

Now, in my dorm room almost a week later, with the door locked and my extraspecial do-not-enter assurance in place, I know why the book

glowed. Why it called to me. It was waiting for me, to give me the one thing I've been waiting ten long years for: the chance to fix everything.

And today is the day I will finally find the courage to actually read it.

"Calm the fluff down," I tell myself, pacing back and forth in front of my desk like the kind of person who stresses about things, which I'm (usually) not. Like saying the words out loud might have more impact on my freak-out. "Just because it's the title of the book doesn't mean it's real."

I pull out my desk chair, plop onto the seat, and straighten the book on the surface of my desk. I nudge it into perfect center.

Letting my nervous energy out by chipping the black polish off my nails bit by bit, I resist the urge to start pacing again.

I am so not a fidgeter. I push limits and bend rules and pretty much let everything go. Or at least I try to. But most of the annoying stuff in life is inconsequential, which makes worrying about it ridiculous.

This book—this possibility—is . . . world-changing.

I've heard about *chronoportation* all my life. The mysterious, dangerous, and highly illegal power of time travel. But it's just a joke, an urban legend like Bigfoot, Atlantis, and the Seven Cities of Gold. *Hematheos* conspiracy kooks have spent centuries trying to unravel its secrets, to find the key to unlocking the fourth dimension. It's an unending quest because it doesn't exist.

The book is real, though.

I've rubbed my fingertips over the edges enough to make sure of that. The leather is worn so smooth I know it must be centuries old, and the heavy coating of dust on the top edge suggests it hasn't been touched in almost as long. Which also makes me believe it might be legitimate. Why would Olympus and Mrs. Philipoulos go to all the bother of hiding the book in the super-restricted archives if the thirteenth power was pure fiction?

There's only one way to find out.

Sucking in a deep breath, I lean forward to my desk, where the book sits. Waiting. It's not that I'm afraid to flip open the cover. Okay, I'm a little afraid. Who knows what will happen to me when I take a peek? If Olympus really wanted the contents of the book hands-off, they might have installed supernatural protection. There might be a hideous or painful curse sealed into the pages.

Which is why the book has been sitting under the hamper in my closet. Every morning I take it out and put it on my desk, with every intention of finally reading it. I don't know what's holding me back. Let's just say fear is a completely foreign emotion to me, so I'm not dealing with it particularly well.

"Oh for the love of Zeus," I snap at myself. "Stop being ridiculous."

How can I fix things if I'm too scared to even read a stupid book?

I reach for the leather cover.

My hand freezes, hovering over the gilt lettering of the title, almost like an invisible force is keeping me from making contact. I know the only force at work here is fear. Fear of the unknown.

"Not knowing is worse," I whisper. Worse than any punishment Olympus could throw at me.

Without allowing myself another weakhearted thought, I dip my fingers beneath the cover and fling the burgundy leather to the side.

Knock, knock, knock.

"Aaarck!"

I leap back, away from the book, sending myself and my chair sprawling across the linoleum tile floor. My heart races, prepared for swarms of locusts or fire-breathing monsters. Or both.

I check my skin for boils.

Knock, knock, knock.

It takes a few seconds for my brain to register the fact that someone is knocking on my door. Probably someone mostly human—I hope—since minions of Olympus don't usually bother much with courtesy.

"Yeah?" I call out, forcing my breathing and heart rate back to the vicinity of normal. I think I pull off nothing-out-of-the-ordinary pretty well for a girl flat on her back under a desk chair.

"It's me," a male voice answers.

Troy!

"Crap," I whisper, then louder, "Just a sec."

I scramble off the floor, righting the chair as I snatch the book off my desk and try to shove it in a drawer. Only I can't find an open spot. My drawers are too full of old homework and school notices and other junk.

"Come on, Nic," Troy whines. "You wouldn't believe what happened in chemistry today."

“Yeah, hold on,” I answer, searching desperately for a hiding spot. My room is not exactly spotless on the scale of cleanliness. Closer to pigsty. “I’m just, uh—” Maybe under the bed. “Getting dressed.”

Diving to the floor, I shove a pile of stuff out of the way, slide the book under, and—just in case—move some of the clothes back into place.

Perfect.

“What are you doing in there?” he asks. “Sounds like you’re tackling the furniture.”

“I told you, Travatas,” I gasp as I unlock my door and swing it open wide, “I was getting dressed.”

His gentle green eyes, with bright gold centers that match the color of his short-cropped hair, give me a once-over beneath raised brows. He knows me too well. To sell the lie, I tug at my tank top hem to make it look like I had to rush.

Troy Travatas is my best friend on the island—and, since I’m pretty much stuck here until graduation, thanks to Olympic decree, that makes him my best friend anywhere. I don’t like lying to him. But we’re practically opposites on the bold-and-daring front. Even the *thought* of stealing a book from the archives would give him a rash. The prospect of attempting time travel—if it really exists—would probably kill him.

Apparently buying my just-getting-dressed act, he shrugs and takes a step forward. Right into my do-not-disturb assurance.

“Ow!” he howls, jumping back from the *photomorphosis* electric-shock curtain I laid over the doorway.

“Sorry,” I say, waving my hand over the invisible shield to make the power disappear. “You rushed me and I forgot.”

He scowls as he steps—tentatively—into my room.

A burnt smell wafts by me. His Imagine Dragons tee is smoldering at the shoulders. I act quickly before he notices, pretending to brush some dust off his shoulder as I use a little *aerokinesis* to cool off the red cotton knit. He still hasn’t forgiven me for the fireworks incident with his Green Day tee. And that was just a tiny hole.

“That hurt more than last time,” he complains. “What’d you do, double the strength?”

“Not on purpose.”

I must have been so keyed up about the book that I added some of my nervous energy to the projection. Usually I don't have to worry about keeping anything more dangerous than a cheerleader out of my room. With the book here—I guess I went a little overboard.

As Troy tromps into my room, rubbing his shoulder where the shock probably traveled up his arm—thankfully there is no evidence of smoldering tee—I close the door behind him. Like it's any other day, he collapses onto my bed, falling in a careless heap across my black comforter.

Only it's not any other day. And when he flops onto my bed, the bounce knocks a pillow onto the floor, and when Troy reaches down to pick it up, he dislodges some of the clothes covering up the book.

And, because the book is probably cursed to cause me more trouble than it's worth, it's glowing again.

"Seriously, I don't know how Ms. Alatza gets away with some of these lessons." Troy lifts himself up onto one elbow, his ankles crossed and his sneakers hanging off the end of the bed. "She gave us an unknown sample in the morning, and we had to spend all day performing tests to identify the compound."

"Oh yeah?" I ask absently, wondering if there is any way I can rehide the book without being obvious about it.

"You wanna know what my sample was?" he asks. Not waiting for a response, he answers, "Potassium."

"Huh."

Maybe if I fake tripping, I could fall right in front of the book and flick some clothes back into place while I'm down. I think I could pull it off.

"Do you know what happens to potassium when you add water?" He sits up. "Of course you don't, because your parents aren't making you take the Summer Intensive Premed Program so you can get into med school, even though you want to be a musician. It *explodes."*

In my heavy-duty combat boots, it would only be a matter of taking a step, catching the toe of one on the heel of the other, and voila! Instant klutz.

I'm ready to begin my fake fall when Troy says, "Sorry."

"What?" I look up, wondering why he's sorry.

Guess I'd been too caught up in my tripping plan to listen to what he was saying. He pulls himself up into a sitting position—right above the

book, darn it—and gives me a sad, apologetic look.

"Your parents," he says, leaning forward over his knees and looking completely embarrassed. Pink cheeks and everything. "I didn't mean to mention them."

"Oh." I hadn't even noticed. "It's fine. No big deal."

I wave off his apology.

His head jerks back and his eyes widen. Then narrow. A look of utter suspicion furrows across his face. Uh-oh.

Troy knows me well enough to expect talk of my parents to make me—at the very least—grumpy. I haven't seen them face-to-face in years, and can't until after graduation. Nonchalance on this issue is definitely cause for alarm.

"No big deal?" he echoes. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah," I say quickly. "Of course."

"You're acting a little off." His brow scowls deeper. "Even for you."

"Thanks," I retort, trying to act like my normal sarcastic self. Nearly impossible at the moment. Nothing feels normal right now. In his current position, forearms resting on his knees out in front of the bed, all Troy has to do is dip his head to see the glowing book.

It takes all my willpower to keep my gaze from darting down to check, which would only make him want to look, completely defeating my whole hide-it-under-the-bed purpose. But it's hard to ignore a glowing tome sitting inches below your best friend's butt.

"I'm fine." I force myself to maintain eye contact. "Really—no!"

Apparently, I didn't force myself strongly enough.

Following the direction of my wayward gaze, Troy drops his head down to peer under the bed. Seeing the book, he glances back up at me with a question in his eyes before reaching down and grabbing the edge.

Oh Hades. If only I'd kept my eyes where they belonged.

If only I hadn't lost my cool. I *never* lose my cool. This whole situation is messing with me.

"Did you know your book is glowing?" Troy asks with a laugh.

I watch, in horror, as he reads the illuminated words.

In a heartbeat, his eyes spear me to the spot. "Where did you get this?"

"Where?" I shrug, trying to play it off. "I don't remem—"

“Cut the crap,” he interrupts, which is so unlike him. “This is serious, Nicole.”

“Maybe,” I say, turning away to fiddle with the drawer handles on my desk. Mostly so he won’t see the signs of panic I am sure are playing in bright red across my face.

“Maybe?” he scoffs.

The mattress squeaks and I feel Troy walk up behind me.

“Definitely.” He drops the book on my desk with a *thwack.* “You know this is illegal. You shouldn’t even have this book.”

Now, Troy is my best friend, and I’m sure he means well. But I don’t deal well with people telling me what I should and should not do—never have. I feel the rebel side of me—which is, I’ll be the first to admit, almost all of me—raise its hackles, ready for a fight.

“Well, I *do* have it,” I say, turning on him, jabbing a finger to his chest. “And I don’t need you to tell me it’s illegal. I’ve done plenty of illegal in my lifetime,” I gloat. “According to Olympic law, I’m a one-woman crime spree.”

Granted, on the scale of major Olympic transgressions, I’m still pretty small-time. But I doubt any of the gods expect me to become an exemplary *hematheos* anytime soon.

“Not like this, Nicole,” he says quietly. “This is serious. Olympus will __”

My fear dissolves like sugar in coffee.

“Olympus can go hang, for all I care.”

And I mean it.

2

Mt. Olympus and I don't exactly have a lovey-dovey relationship. More like it's kind of my personal mission to sidestep the gods and their stupid laws as much as possible. They've never given me a reason to respect their leadership. Quite the opposite.

My parents spent their entire lives following Olympic law to the letter. Dotting every *i* and filing every report in triplicate. My dad was an adviser to Zeus, living and working on Mount Olympus, an honor awarded to a devoted few. Mom volunteered as a liaison between Olympus and the *nymphae*, the wild family of minor nature deities. We were happy. Then, in an instant—because of one stupid prank I pulled—all Dad's years of service and devotion and straight-arrow living went out the window. He and Mom got banished from the *hematheos* world, forced to live as ordinary humans and make their way on their own, without powers or godly connections. They had to start from scratch.

So when it comes to obeying Olympic law, well, I obey the ones I feel like obeying, and ignore the rest. And I don't feel like obeying too many of them.

I turn my back on Troy before he can see the tears of frustration pushing at my eyes. Normally it would take serious injury to make me cry, but between the book and my parents and the hope I'm feeling for the first time in a decade, the emotions are a little overwhelming.

He makes a quiet growl in his throat. "Is this about your parents?"

"So what if it is." I grab the book up against my chest, steeling myself against my emotions as best I can, turning to face Troy with all the defiance I feel for Olympus. "They don't deserve their punishment."

It was a stupid idea—*my* stupid idea—and Griffin Blake, my childhood best friend, went along with it. We didn't know what would happen; we didn't know the consequences. We didn't know our parents would take the blame.

“I know, Nic,” Troy says, stepping forward and reaching out like he wants to comfort me.

I don’t do comfort, either.

“And neither do Griffin’s parents,” I snap, pulling away from him.

That’s the worst of it. My parents getting banished is bad enough, but at least they’re still alive. I can still call them and email them. After graduation I’ll get to go see them. Griffin’s . . . they’re just gone. They took the blame, and when he tried to explain, they told Olympus he was lying to protect them. For that, for his supposed lies, they got the worst of the punishment. Vanished, off the face of the earth. Because the gods knew that would make Griffin’s suffering all the more excruciating.

Griffin and I didn’t speak for years. Not until he started dating Phoebe and she made us talk through our history. I’d spent ten years blaming him, thinking he’d just let our parents take the fall. That day we lost each other and our parents.

All because of a stupid childhood mistake.

“Nic, I know you feel guilty about what—”

“Guilty?” I gape at him. “Guilty? Because of what I did, my parents got expelled from everything they knew, and Griffin’s got dead. Our parents stepped forward to take responsibility for our actions, and they ended up paying too high a price to keep us safe.”

“What you both did,” Troy argues. “Griffin was part of it, too.”

“Yes, we both fed the ambrosia to Hera’s son,” I spit. “But I was the one who suggested it.”

“You were seven.” Troy puts his hands on my shoulders, trying to make me feel better. “You didn’t know.”

“That doesn’t matter. None of that matters.” I shrug off his hands. “*I* should have been punished, not them.”

I should have been banished. Or smoted. At least then I wouldn’t have to live every day with this all-consuming guilt. There hasn’t been a feast day or holiday since the decree when I didn’t beg Zeus and Hera and the rest of the clowns to let me take the punishments instead.

As if they would ever listen to a lowly descendant. A half blood, in their eyes.

Every time I see Griffin, every time I miss my mom, every time I get to do whatever rebellious, crazy thing I want to do, I think about the fact that

my parents don’t have that kind of freedom. And Griffin’s don’t have any.

“Your parents knew what might happen.” Troy shakes his head sadly, still trying to make me feel better. “But what’s done is done, you can’t go back and—”

“Can’t I?” I hold up the book.

“No,” he says, reaching for the book. “No way.”

I jerk it out of his reach. “Yes.”

“That’s crazy, Nicole.”

Like I don’t know that.

“Don’t you see?” I stare at the book. “I was meant to find this. It’s why Phoebe came to this island and why I became her friend. It’s why she and Griffin got together and why she forced me to patch things up with him. It’s why I went into the secret archives with her. It’s why the book started glowing when I walked by.”

“It started glowing when I sat on your bed, too,” Troy argues. “Maybe it just likes people.”

“Troy, this is the chance I’ve been looking for!”

Why can’t he understand what an amazing opportunity this presents? Why can’t he see that the potential consequences don’t matter? But he can’t. Which is precisely why I didn’t want him to find out about the book in the first place.

“This is the chance I’ve been waiting for.” I swing the book away from his grasping hands. “With this I can go back to that moment and fix . . . everything.”

“It’s too dangerous.” He stops trying for the book, instead focusing his attention on me. Like he can make me understand his point. “Do you know what will happen when Olympus finds out? And they *always* find out.”

The problem is, I *do* understand his point. It just doesn’t matter.

“I don’t care.”

“You should.” He steps back, shaking his head at me. “You should care a lot. Time travel is one of the unbreakable laws. The gods will rain down punishment on you that will make one of Headmaster Petrolas’s detentions look like afternoon tea.”

And boy do I know from Headmaster Petrolas’s detentions.

Maybe, if it were anything but this, I would be too scared to follow through. As it is, I’m pretty scared. But I’m determined even more.

The potential gain far, far outweighs the risks.

“I don’t have a choice.”

“You always have a choice, Nicole.”

I meet his gaze full on, trying to make him understand my side. “Not one I can live with.”

For several long seconds, he just stares into my eyes, his green and gold trying to read any weakness in my determination. I even feel a tickle in my brain and I know he’s using *psychospection* to feel out my thoughts, too. He might find some fear and doubt in there, but he will also find a steel wall of firm resolution.

I know he senses that when he finally takes a deep breath and closes his eyes.

A lot of things in my life may come and go, but I can always count on Troy to be reliable, cautious, and—in the end—completely supportive and understanding.

“Fine,” he finally says. “What do we have to do?”

“We?” I laugh. “There’s no *we* in this game, Travatas. I’m doing this alone.”

“Not gonna happen.”

“Troy—”

“Oh, so you *want* me to tell a certain vengeful librarian you have a book from the secret archives out on loan?”

I’m not amused.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

He just shrugs, giving me that adorably innocent puppy-dog look that always seems to get him out of tight spaces. “Or maybe Headmaster Petrolas. I’m sure he’d like to know what you have planned.”

“I could curse your mouth,” I threaten. “Make it so you can’t say anything.”

“Tongue’s already cursed, remember?”

Right. He finally confessed his dream of becoming a musician to his parents, and they cursed his taste buds to ensure a constant reminder of their disapproval. Troy descends from Asklepios, the god of medicine. You don’t deviate from an ancient line of doctors without a little parental fury. He hasn’t been able to eat sweets for weeks.

He’s trying to make a joke out of the situation, but that doesn’t change my mind. Griffin is the only other person with a stake in the outcome, and I’m not asking him—or anyone else—to take this risk on my behalf. Enough people have already paid for my actions. I’m not adding to the list.

“I don’t want you to get into trouble,” I explain. He’s already in enough hot water about the whole musician thing. “I won’t risk you getting hurt.”

Or worse. When dealing with the gods, there’s always something worse.

“Nicole,” he says, in a tone way more steely and serious than I’m used to from Troy, “you’re my best friend. You need my help. There is no way I am letting you go through this alone. End of discussion.”

My mouth drops opens to argue, but I snap it back shut just as quickly. Troy doesn’t usually make stands like this. I love him, but he’s about ninety percent coward. It took him almost eighteen years to come clean to his parents about his music. The fact that he’s standing up to me, of all people, is shocking and impressive.

Besides, he’s right that I will probably need help. Who knows what the requirements for time travel are going to be? Not me, clearly, since I’ve been too chicken to even open the book. And he’s also right that he’s my best friend. What he might not know, though, is that I trust him more than anybody else in this world—or any other world.

If I’m going to have a partner in crime in this enterprise, it’s going to be Troy or no one.

I finally say, “Okay.”

“Listen, Nicole, I know you don’t like relying on—” He jerks back and blinks a few times. “Did you just say *okay?”*

I stare at him.

“Wow.” His green-gold eyes widen in shock. “This must really be serious.”

“It is.”

Straightening his shoulders, like he needs to muster his strength, he asks, “So, what do we do first?”

“I don’t know,” I explain, giving the book a wary look. “I haven’t read it yet.”

“What are we waiting for?” He grabs the book from my hand, drops back onto my bed with his back against the wall, and sets the leather volume in his lap. “Let’s crack this baby open.”

He’s showing way more courage than he feels, I’m sure. But I’m thankful for every ounce of fake bravado. Maybe this is why I waited. Maybe I’m supposed to read the book with Troy, to follow the instructions and travel back through time with him at my side. All of a sudden, my fears and doubts and cowardliness evaporate. I’m ready.

I climb onto the bed next to him, scooting back to the wall for support. We each wrap one hand around the corner of the cover, and pull it open.

I’m not sure what I expected to happen. Thunderbolts, swarms of locusts, a Go Directly to Hades, Do Not Pass Go, Do Not Collect $200 card. But, in reality, opening this particular book is just like opening any other.

As the burgundy leather cover swings out of the way, there is a blank page followed by a title page, which reads:

The Art and Science of Chronoportation: How to Travel Through Time Without Getting Caught

“That’s promising,” Troy says.

“Not getting caught would be a definite advantage,” I agree.

Next is a table of contents, listing a preface, several chapters on the history of *chronoportation*, and—finally—the instructions. We look at each other and then Troy quickly flips to the last section. We don’t need a history lesson; we need directions.

“The power *of chronoportation* is not as simple as the other twelve *dynamotheos* powers,” Troy reads. “Time travel requires more than just mental skill and should never be undertaken without careful consideration of the consequences.”

“Blah blah,” I say. “Skip ahead to the good part.”

“Funny,” Troy says, giving me an ironic look. “I think this is the part you need to hear most.”

I throw him a scowl. “If you’re going to be dogging me about this the whole time, then you can leave now.”

He sighs, and turns back to the book.

“It says,” Troy explains, even though I’m reading over his shoulder, “we need to get the blessing of Chronos, the god of time.”

No wonder Olympus outlawed time travel. Chronos is one of the old gods—a primordial. They and their powers make the Olympic gods nervous. They’ve been around since before time began—literally, since

Chronos is the god of time. They don't abide by Olympic law and there have been more than a few . . . skirmishes about that throughout history.

"And to do that," Troy reads ahead a bit, "we need to gather three offerings."

"What kind of offerings?"

Troy reads silently for a minute. "It doesn't say specifically. Just that they need to represent the three Olympic kings."

"That would be Zeus, Poseidon, and Hades."

Rulers of Olympus, the oceans, and the underworld.

"Oh, look." Troy points to a spot farther down the page. "It says, see *Offerings to the Gods* by the same author."

I have a bad feeling about that. Climbing off the bed, I log on to my computer and pull up the Academy's online library catalog. It only takes a few seconds to verify my fears.

I slump in my chair.

"Don't they have it?" Troy asks.

"Oh, they have it all right," I answer. "It just happens to be another volume locked away in the secret archives."

"That's bad." Troy closes the book and comes to read the computer screen over my shoulder. "How did you get in last time?"

"Mrs. Philipoulos took us in." And that hadn't been easy. She had been ready to send us out on our ears until she realized we were looking for Phoebe's dad's trial record. She deemed that worthy of bending library rules.

Highly doubtful she'd do the same for a book about making offerings to the gods. Especially if I'm the one doing the asking.

"Well, we need to get inside," Troy says. "Any ideas?"

"Not unless you know someone who works as a library aid."

Troy is silent, and I look up to find his cheeks bright pink.

"Actually . . ."

"Spill."

"Look, I don't even know if she'll help."

She? "Who is *she*?"

Troy shakes his dark-blond head. "Let me ask her. It'll be better if you don't get involved."

I scowl at him—a trick that usually works—but he ignores me as he pushes to his feet.

“Meet me in the upper level of the library in an hour.” He hands me the book. “Either I’ll have it or we’ll figure out a Plan B.”

I watch, confused, as Troy leaves my room. Other than hiding his dream of becoming a musician from his parents, he’s usually rubbish at keeping secrets. That he’s keeping this one from me—and that it involves a girl who makes him blush—only makes me more intrigued.

But if this girl can get the book that will help me make things right, I’ll let him keep his secret. For now.

3

The library makes me uncomfortable. All that gold and marble and the smell of musty, old books. I'd rather be pretty much anywhere.

I start tapping my fingers on the surface of one of the ancient-looking tables. The place is empty. The Academy only offers a few summer programs—like the premed one Troy's parents are making him take—so the campus is pretty deserted. Even Goddess Boot Camp, the training camp Phoebe had to complete to learn how to use her new powers, is over. All the snooty rich kids are off on their yachts in Ibiza or working at Daddy's law firm or Mommy's ad agency for the summer. The only ones left are the ones in summer school and those of us who have nowhere else to go.

I'm stuck on the island year-round. If I didn't get a reprieve from all the godlets in the summer I'd go insane.

It's been more than an hour since Troy said to meet him here. I'm getting antsy. If he can't get his hands on the book, I don't know what the next step will be. I can't exactly knock on Headmaster Petrolas's door and ask him how to travel through time.

It's not like he can expel me—terms of the Olympic decree—but I'm sure I'd get a lifetime of his worst detentions ever.

If Troy can't get the book, though, it might be—

Troy appears at the top of the grand, curving staircase looking very guilty. His eyes shift left and right before rushing over to my table and dropping into the chair next to me.

His hands are empty. My heart thumps.

"Your girlfriend couldn't get it?"

He lifts his brows, spreads his arms out over the table, and then pulls something out of his left sleeve. His grin tells me everything I need to know.

"She's not my girlfriend," he insists.

Snatching the small, green book from his fingers, I ask, "How?"

Before he can answer, an annoying female voice says, “See you around, Troy.”

I turn to see Adara—aka evil cheer queen from Hades—waving as she crosses to the main entrance. My jaw drops. No wonder he didn’t want me involved. My temper has a short fuse around petty popular girls.

This descendant of Aphrodite is pretty much the antithesis of everything I am, was, or ever will be.

“What?” She can’t be his secret helper. She’s like our archenemy. “Not *Adara?*”

He can’t be interested in her. He can’t *like* her. He just can’t.

Troy waves to the cheer witch while shushing me. “It’s not what you think.”

“Oh, really?” I ask as the door closes behind her. “What exactly do I think?”

“Don’t worry about it.”

“You dating that vapid cow is definitely something to worry about.”

He scowls at me. “We aren’t dating.” He nods at the book. “Don’t we have work to do?”

I’m torn between wanting to push him for answers and wanting to find out what the three offerings are. My best friend dating my worst enemy is pretty awful, but I have more important things at stake at the moment. I can grill him later. In the end, the bigger picture wins out.

I flip open *Offerings to the Gods* without hesitation. “Don’t think I’m letting this go indefinitely.”

Troy smirks and then bends his head over the book. “What does it say? What are the offerings?”

I quickly flip through the yellowed pages. It’s really short, maybe two dozen pages altogether—barely worth the binding—so it doesn’t take me long to skim the key points.

“It’s pretty straightforward,” I explain. “The three offerings are a gold feather, a silver seashell, and a ruby pomegranate seed.”

“That’s it?” Troy frowns. “Does that sound too easy?”

“The items aren’t the tricky part,” I say as I close the book. “Their locations are.”

“I have a feeling I’m not going to like this.”

“You won’t.” I twirl the volume under my finger. “The golden feather must come from Zeus’s eagle, the silver seashell from Poseidon’s throne room, and the ruby pomegranate seed from Hades’s palace.”

“That means . . .”

I nod. “I have to visit their homes.”

Troy is stunned silent.

The homes of the three god kings—also known as Mount Olympus, the seafloor, and the underworld—are not exactly open to visitors. They’re not exactly easy to access, either. Most *hematheos* go their whole lives without ever visiting any of the palaces, let alone all three. This is not my idea of a fun summer vacation, but a girl has to do what a girl has to do.

Troy sighs as I slip the tiny book into my back pocket.

We get up to leave just as Phoebe and Griffin walk in the door. A gift bag dangles from Phoebe’s hand. They’re stuck here for the summer, just like us: Phoebe because Headmaster Petrolas is her new stepdad, and Griffin because he has nowhere else to go.

I throw Troy a quick scowl—he’d better keep his trap shut about what we’re doing. These two don’t need to be involved. No one else does.

“Hey, guys,” Phoebe says, swinging the gift bag. “What’s up?”

“Hey,” I say back.

Griffin waves. “Hi, Nic. Troy.”

Troy stares at the floor.

Phoebe frowns at me. “I thought you hated libraries?”

“I do,” I reply. “We were just . . .” I glance at Troy, who shrugs helplessly. “Working on something. What are you guys doing here?”

She holds up the bag. “I got Mrs. Philipoulos a thank-you treat from the bakery. For helping with my dad’s trial record.”

“We’re going for a run after,” Griffin says. “What are you working on?”

“Did you read the record yet?” I ask Phoebe, hoping that will divert them from what Troy and I are doing, even though I already know the answer. If she’d read it, she would have told me.

“No.” She looks down at her running shoes. “I will. Soon.”

Griffin wraps an arm around her shoulder.

“When the time is right,” I say. Then, patting her on the arm as I walk past, I add, “We’ll let you get on with your gift giving.”

“And your running,” Troy adds.

He hurries out in front of me, throwing Phoebe and Griffin a quick wave as he escapes out into the hall. I turn and follow him before they can ask any questions. Now that I know what needs to be done, I'm eager to get started. And without an audience.

"I don't like it, Nic," Troy says, pacing in my room.

"I'm not asking you to like it," I reply. "I'm not even asking you to be here."

He flashes me an angry glare.

"Well, I am here," he says. "And I'm staying. I'm not letting you do this alone."

"Then enough with the warnings and disapproving looks." I shove both books onto the top shelf in my closet. Just because we know what we have to do doesn't mean we might not need them again. The gods are brilliant at surprise twists. "Or I'll *neofacture* a gag and some handcuffs."

For a second, he looks like he wants to argue.

"You're right," he finally says. "What's the plan?"

I grab my desk chair and swing it around so I can drop into the seat with my arms over the back. "The golden feather," I say. "That's definitely the easiest."

"Easy?" Troy says with a cough-laugh.

I scowl and he snaps his mouth shut.

"I can *autoport* to Olympus," I explain. "I've been there before."

Back when all this started. The memories are still so fresh they could have happened yesterday. If I close my eyes, I'm there, in the gleaming halls of Olympus. I can see my younger self, blond hair bouncing in pigtails as little Griffin and I race toward the nursery.

I carried the ambrosia. It was a tiny amount, a small cup of the glowing golden liquid.

We snuck into the room where Hera's new baby slept. His nanny, we knew, always drifted off to sleep as soon as the baby fell quiet—being Hera's servant was an exhausting job. As we tiptoed across the floor, she didn't stir.

Peering over the edge of the crib, I was excited. I thought we were doing something great—feeding the baby the nectar of the gods. The grown-up gods drank it like water, but the poor baby had never had a taste.

He would grow up to be a god, too, and I thought he deserved a taste of the magical food.

I had no idea it was poison to any god under the age of two.

I had no idea it would steal his immortality.

“Nicole?” Troy’s voice penetrates my memories.

“What?” I snap, to cover up the emotion pulsing through me.

I’ve relived that memory so many times in the years since, it’s seared into my brain like a red-hot brand. The only way to get rid of it is to undo what we did.

To change the past.

If I could go back and stop the prank, maybe even stop my seven-year-old self from thinking up the idea in the first place, everything would go back to how it should be. We would all—me, my parents, Griffin, and his parents—get back the lives we were supposed to have.

“When do you want to go?” Troy asks, ignoring my glare.

I push up out of my chair. “Now.”

“Now?” he chokes, then catches himself before I can threaten to restrain him. “Right. Now. Sounds good.”

“Relax,” I say with a grin. “I’ll *autoport* to the gates, sneak into Zeus’s office, and be back here before you can blink.”

Troy doesn’t look convinced. But he keeps his concerns to himself. He nods. “I’ll be waiting.”

At the fearful look in his eyes, I hesitate. He’s really scared for me. He’s my friend and he cares whether I get hurt or in trouble.

“I’ll be fine,” I promise.

He takes a deep breath and nods again.

Then, before he can say anything, I close my eyes and concentrate. I picture the massive golden gates at the entrance to Mount Olympus. They’re purely for show—the gods have other protections in place to keep out the riffraff—but they are impressive.

I focus on the spot to the right of the entrance, behind the column of white stone that anchors the gate to the wall surrounding the entire Olympic complex. That spot is hidden from anyone standing at the gate, and out of the sight of the golden gargoyles that guard the wall from above.

It’s the only place I know for sure I can zap into Olympus without being seen.

My skin tingles and bright light glows through my closed lids. When the sensations are gone, I open my eyes. And find myself standing face-to-face with a golden giant.

I open my mouth to scream, but quickly slap my hand in place.

The giant is a statue, an unmoving sentry guarding the gates of Olympus. He's a new addition since I used to play out here as a child.

"Get a grip, Nic."

When I whisper the words, the statue's eyes blink open.

Crap. Crap, crap, crap.

This must be a creation of Hephaestus, Olympus's handyman. It's an automaton guard to protect the precious gods around-the-clock.

I wait, heart pounding, expecting the guard to reach out a beefy gold hand and grab me in its unyielding grip. But as much as I want to run, I stay utterly still. So does the guard.

It's eyes swing side to side once, like it's checking the area, and then glide shut.

I bite my lips to keep from exhaling a sigh of relief. I should have known. Old Heph's creatures are never quite perfect. This one must have a vision weakness—like it can detect movement, not shapes.

Lucky me.

Tiptoeing lighter than I've ever stepped in my life, I inch my way out from in front of the guard, around its massive gold body, and make my way for the tall hedge that surrounds the outer wall of Olympus. The bushes are dangerous—thorns tipped with poison that is designed to torment more than kill. Anyone trying to sneak in this way is in for a serious hurt.

I only hope the password hasn't changed.

Facing the section twenty paces from the front gate, I close my eyes, take a breath, and say, *"Gia tin agapi."*

For love.

If I remember the story right, after a pair of human adventurers found their way into the hallowed halls of mythology, Zeus called for major renovation of the Olympic security system. The upgrade included doubling the height of the wall, activating non-Olympian sensors, and installing the poisonous hedge. At the time, one of the gods was having a love affair with human. That god convinced Hephaestus to leave an access point. A way for the human lover to get in and out of the palace without detection.

My mother told me it was Aphrodite, but I've always suspected it was Zeus himself. Total hypocrite.

After speaking the password, I wait a few seconds, kind of expecting something to happen—a movement or a sound. Nothing.

I can't stand here all day. I have to risk it, to go on faith that the password worked. I'm not big on faith. I prefer action. But I don't have a choice.

Reaching out, I brace myself for the scratch and sting of poison thorns as I shove my hand into the hedge. Instead of pain shooting up my arm, I see the hedge flicker like a bad computer screen.

My body sags with relief as I step through the false image. A hologram. The gods are getting computer savvy. One challenge down, about seventy thousand to go.

I emerge from the hedge and look up at the massive wall. Good thing I don't have to scale it, because I'm not a fan of heights. Breaching the wall is actually easier than the hedge—probably because the gods think no one will make it through their poison bushes. I step up to the gleaming white surface and scan the smooth stone blocks for the one with a faint handprint burned into the marble. The sign is only visible from a sharp angle, but even though it's been a decade since I tried to sneak inside, when I step up to the wall and turn my head to the side, I immediately see the hand.

I allow myself a small smile. Despite assuring Troy that I knew what I was doing, part of me wondered if things had changed too much in ten years, if I might not even make it inside.

My last thread of doubt evaporates as I place my palm on the marked block and the section of stone in front of me sinks back into the wall.

The moment the opening is big enough, I slip inside. No point waiting out in the open just asking to be caught. I weave my way through the carefully carved labyrinth—a dark passage barely taller than I am and with only the fading glow of the outside world to light the rocky way.

I wish I could use my *photomorphosis* power to illuminate the creepy space. Yet another supernatural protection: no *hematheos* powers on Olympus grounds.

With a suffocating *whoosh,* the secret door slides shut, plunging the passageway into darkness.

Don't freak out.

I place my palm on the wall and hurry forward, trusting my memory of the twists and turns to get out into the main hall as quickly as possible.

And I'm right. A few seconds later, I slam face-first into the end wall. Yeah, should have seen that coming.

I kneel down, feeling for the trigger I know is there. Even in the dark, my fingers find it almost instantly. I pull on the handle and then jump up out of the way as the interior door glides open.

For a moment I'm blinded by the glow. I'd forgotten just how bright Mount Olympus can be. Squinting against the burn, I step out into the hallway . . . and am overcome by memory.

The brightness wasn't the only thing I'd forgotten. As I scan the space around me—the long, impressive, intimidating hall leading from the main gates to the Hall of Gods—it's like I never left. Every surface is carved from the purest white marble, the kind that can only be quarried from the bowels of Hades, and inlaid with every color of glittering gemstone imaginable. Bloodred rubies, sea-blue sapphires, and grass-green emeralds. Pearly opals, golden topaz, and bright purple amethyst. And every carving, every inlay, every spot that looks like it could use a little shine, is gilded with twenty-four-karat gold. It's a treasure hunter's dream.

Since the day my parents got banished from Olympus, and me along with them, I've imagined this moment. I pictured myself brought to tears—a rare thing for me—or seething with fury or raging with disgust. But never once did I imagine what I'm actually feeling. As I stare around at the palace that used to be my home, I feel . . . joy.

4

Maybe I shouldn't be surprised by the happy memories. Until the Incident, my childhood was a happy one, filled with fun and games and plenty of adventure.

My dad and Griffin's mom both worked for Zeus, which is why we got to live in his palace. It was a rare opportunity.

As the only *hematheos* children allowed on Olympus at the time, we spent a lot of time amusing ourselves and each other.

One of my favorite games was the scavenger hunt. We would steal two baskets of eggs from the palace kitchen—one gold and one silver. Griffin would hide the silver ones, I would hide the golden ones, and then we would race to see who found all their eggs first.

This game made us equals. While Griffin could win the footraces and I almost always outclimbed him, in the scavenger hunts we were equally matched. Griffin ran faster, covering ground more quickly. But I was more devious. My hiding places were almost impossible to find, unless he knew where to look. On more than one occasion, even I forgot where I'd hidden the eggs and we had to join forces to find the last few long after I'd filled my silver basket with his eggs.

I'm sure there are still some hidden away.

Griffin and I used to race down this very hall. From the edge of the mosaic inside the main doors, we would sprint all the way to the other end —which, for a pair of seven-year-olds, was a long run. Griffin always won. He loved to run more than I did. I actually hated it, but I loved the competition, the drive to beat him next time. We would collapse in a panting heap at the far end, right in front of the entrance to the Hall of Gods, where the Olympians would be inside making decisions that would alter countless lives without giving those affected a second thought.

As I walk down the hall, following the path of our races, my memory turns bitter in my stomach. I pause for a moment in front of the golden

doors, inlaid with onyx and opal to reflect the balance of power within. Balance? That's a joke. The balance always seems to skew to one side when the gods are involved.

Part of me wants to burst inside, to interrupt the important business of the day and demand they retract their decision about my and Griffin's parents.

But the gods are childish creatures. Begging them to do something would only resolve them to do the opposite. I don't know what could be worse, but I'm sure the gods could find some way to increase the sentences.

Before instinct takes over, I turn and head down the side hall toward the main offices of the gods.

Various chambers line either side of this passage: offices for minor deities, meeting rooms, waiting areas. Griffin and I used to love playing hide-and-seek in the palace because there always seemed to be new places to hide. I preferred hiding under desks or behind curtains. I almost always found Griffin in a closet or behind a door. He chose the safer hiding places. One time, I hid beneath the bed in Hera's chamber—boy, was that terrifying. It's a miracle I wasn't scarred for life.

As I make my way through the palace, passing elegant statues of beautiful goddesses, curving vases painted with scenes from Olympic history, and mosaic-walled alcoves, I smile. Walking past one particularly tall vase, I'm snagged by a memory. I used to love trying to find spots Griffin couldn't reach, even though he had been a few inches taller than me.

This vase was precisely the kind of thing I would try to tackle.

I hesitate, wondering if I should waste precious time on this little sidetrack. But then I shake my head. Other than not wanting to get caught trespassing on Mount Olympus, and Troy probably freaking out back home—which is always good for him—I'm on my own time schedule. Curiosity gets the best of me.

Walking around behind the pedestal that holds the vase, I lift up on my tiptoes—no easy feat in steel-toed combat boots—and reach for the top lip of the vase. Only I'm not as nimble as I used to be, and instead of carefully reaching inside, I knock the rim and send the vase flying.

I dive for it, launching myself full-body across the marble floor, arms outstretched and reaching desperately for the fragile vase. I won't make it. *Hematheos* instinct kicks in and I try to *neofacture* a huge feather pillow

before the vase hits the floor. But no pillow materializes in the powers-free Mount Olympus. I watch helplessly as the vase falls to the floor. Then, two inches from impact, it bounces like it hit something soft and then rolls across the air. I lay there, frozen, my heart pounding.

Yet another supernatural protection—the gods must really love their art.

I'm lucky. If this thing had shattered into a million pieces, there's no way I get out of here without being detected.

"Nice move," I mutter to myself.

Jumping back to my feet, I dust off my bruised ego and then reach for the vase. As I lift it off the invisible cushion, something rattles around in the base.

I grin.

I turn the vase upside down and almost laugh when a shiny golden egg rolls out onto the invisible cushion. I set the vase back on its perch, careful to make sure it's facing the same way—the gods are notoriously anal about their objects—and then snatch the egg off the air.

It's a little tarnished after a decade in a vase, but it's still a pretty thing.

The egg goes a little blurry and, as I squint to clear the vision, I realize it's not the egg. It's my eyes. A renegade sheen of tears is blurring my sight.

No way. Shoving the unwelcome emotion aside, I jam the egg into my pocket and take a deep breath. Just like the egg, Griffin and I used to be shiny. We used to have all the promise of a bright future, but the gods took that away from us.

I refuse to let things stay as they are. All the egg needs is a little polish. All Griffin and I need is to undo that moment in the past. And I'm going to make that happen for both of us.

Hurrying down the hall, I find myself on autopilot to Zeus's chamber. Three right turns and one to the left. Last door at the end.

I break into a jog—come on, like I'm gonna sprint? I *still* hate running—and quietly push open the door without stopping to think. But as I slip inside, I know I should have held back a little on the impulse.

There, twenty feet across the room, bent over a huge stack of scrolls on his massive marble desk, is Zeus. My great-grandfather.

My heart feels like it wants to pound right out of my rib cage, up my throat, out my mouth, and onto the marble floor at my feet. I can't breathe. For at

least thirty seconds, I stand there utterly still, my pulse throbbing in my ears, and not even daring to take a breath.

Part of it is the fear of getting caught, sure. I mean, here I am in the office of the king of the gods and he is *sitting right there*! Getting caught could mean more than a simple banishment. Troy would have to search the four corners of the earth to find all the pieces.

But the other part—probably the bigger part at this point—is seeing my great-grandfather. I haven't seen or heard from him since the day we were sent from Olympus. It was like he disowned me when they banished us.

That hurt. It took me a long time to come to grips with that.

Even if your great-grandpa is an Olympic god with hundreds, if not thousands, of grandchildren—don't even get me started on the great-grandchildren—you still want him to bounce you on his knee. You still want him to teach you how to climb a tree or to help you do your homework.

The official punishment, being banned from Olympus, having my parents banished and Griffin's smoted, was bad enough. But the emotional punishment was almost worst. The little girl inside me wants to run across the room, climb onto his lap, and have him hug me and tell me everything will be okay.

Ha, as if that would ever happen. The little girl would be forcibly removed from the palace and probably chained to a rock or sentenced to a stretch in the hottest, driest desert they could find.

Movement behind the desk catches my eye.

A flutter of wings. The golden eagle sits on a golden perch—shocking—right behind Zeus's shoulder. The bird preens a bit, rubbing a wing over its beak. When it straightens upright, I swear it looks right at me.

From the seemingly vast space across the room, I hold my breath, waiting for the eagle to squawk and draw my great-grandfather's attention to the intruder standing frozen in the doorway. Just my luck, too, being caught by something as stupid as a bird.

But the squawk never comes. Zeus stays bent over the papers on his desk, scribbling on some, sliding them into piles, and shuffling them around. I can hear the scratch of his quill on parchment, scrape, scrape, scraping like the sound of steel dragging on concrete.

I rack my brain for an excuse, a reason to be where I am—where I most definitely shouldn't be. I'm on a quest? I'm lost? I'm looking for the bathroom?

None of them even sound good in my mind, which means they'll sound worse if I speak them out loud.

I have to get out of here. I should slip back out the way I came in and get the heck off Mount Olympus. I know that means I won't get the feather—at least, not today. It also means I won't get caught, and I can't exactly complete the quest and go back in time if I'm chained up in the dungeons of Mount Olympus. Besides, those dungeons smell *awful.*

I'm about to reach behind me to grab the door, my escape plan in effect, when the sound of snapping fingers stops me.

I look up, expecting to see Zeus glaring at me, waiting for his guards to show up to haul me away. But my great-grandfather hasn't looked up from his papers. He snaps his fingers again and points at the golden chalice sitting at the corner of his desk.

Then he returns his focus to his papers and I stand there staring. And blinking.

Is he serious? He wants me to fill his chalice?

My mind snaps the pieces into place. He must think I'm a serving girl, come to attend his every need. I couldn't do it, could I?

I scan the room and spot the large pitcher on a side table. That would mean crossing to the side table, leaving myself vulnerable in the middle of the room, and then walking up next to him at his desk. *Next to him.* It's a stupid idea. It's a risky, ridiculous, moronic idea.

I'm heading for the pitcher before I can talk myself out of it.

As I wrap my hand around the handle I am overcome by the sweet scent of ambrosia. I haven't smelled the stuff in years—not since the incident, when ambrosia sealed my parents' fate—but the sense memory is overwhelming. There is a reason the gods love this stuff.

Taking a quick breath, I lift the pitcher and carry it over to the desk. My legs are shaking. So are my hands. My everything is shaking as I walk up next to my great-grandfather.

This is bad. So very bad.

I know this, but at the same time the adrenaline is rushing my bloodstream, filling me with the thrill of danger. I've never been much of an

adrenaline junkie—I prefer nonterrifying rebellion—but I have to admit, I'm almost as excited as I am scared.

Holding the pitcher out over the desk, over the chalice, I hope Zeus doesn't notice the hands of his serving girl are shaking like a kid with monsters under the bed.

As the amber liquid pours from the heavy pitcher into the empty golden chalice, I try to stay back, out of Zeus's peripheral vision. The last thing I need is him noticing anything about me—although you would think his serving girls don't usually wear studded bracelets and combat boots. But I guess he's absorbed in his work, because he ignores me.

The eagle is on his other side.

I lean back around the chair, trying to reach the long tail feathers without spilling ambrosia all over the very important paperwork. That would definitely get great-grandpa's attention.

I can't quite reach, so I wait until the chalice is full before stepping back and making the grab.

Right before I can pluck a single feather from the eagle's tail, Zeus clears his throat.

"Thank you."

I jerk back. The king of the gods deigning to thank a lowly serving girl? That must be a first. Hopefully he's not feeling magnanimous enough to make eye contact. I need to stop wasting time and get the Hades out of here.

Without another pause, I clamp my fingers over a feather and yank. The eagle squawks so loud I think it damaged my eardrum. Clutching the feather to my chest, I shrink back, waiting for Zeus to turn around and discover why exactly his bird is freaking out.

But the god king barely notices.

"Feed the creature," he says absently.

He pulls open a drawer, reaches inside, and then holds up his hand. There, held loose in his grip, is what looks like a dog treat.

I glance nervously at the eagle, who is still scowling at me.

This can't be happening. It's not like I have another choice. If I don't feed the stupid thing, Zeus is going to wonder why his serving girl is disobeying him. Which means he's going to look up and realize that I'm not his serving girl, and next thing you know it's a one-way ticket to the dungeons of Olympus.

So, as much as I want to do nothing more than run as fast as I can, I reach out and take the treat.

As I do, my fingertips brush against his hand. My heart thumps in my chest as I realize this is the first time I have touched my great-grandfather since the Incident.

Clearly he doesn't feel equally affected, because he just drops his hand and goes back to work. Typical.

I hurry around him, shove the treat in the eagle's beak, and head back toward the door. My spine is stiff and my boot steps soft as I try not to draw any extra attention to my retreat.

I swear, every last god on the mountain must be able to hear my heartbeat.

By some miracle of luck—something I don't usually have in great supply—I make it out of the office without notice. The moment I step foot in the hall I'm ready to break into a sprint—yes, an actual sprint. But before I can take a single step I collide into another person.

"I'm so sorry," a girl's voice says. "I did not watch where I was going well enough."

Finding myself face-to-face with the serving girl I had just been impersonating is a little bit of a surreal moment. Of course, face-to-face doesn't quite apply because she doesn't lift her eyes to look at me.

"No worries," I insist.

I step aside so she can continue on her path. The moment the tail of her flowy white robe disappears through the door, I'm in a full-out race for the front door.

My luck holds, and I make it back through the back chambers, to the entrance hall, and out the front gates without being seen. The moment I'm clear of the protection, I *autoport* myself the heck out of there.

Step one: success!

"I got it," I shout the moment I reappear in my room. "Troy, I—"

"Got what?" Phoebe asks.

Mother of Zeus. I knew I hadn't sold the nothing-is-going-on act in the library. She knows me too well. And she knows Troy is a pushover.

I scowl at Troy, who shrugs and gives me an I-couldn't-stop-her look, and then turn to face Phoebe. She isn't cowed by my scowl.

"Want to tell me what's going on?" she asks.

“Not really,” I say.

“Too bad.” She crosses to my desk, pulls out the chair, and drops into the seat. “Tell me anyway.”

5

"Nothing's going on," I insist.

"Right," Phoebe says with a laugh. "You're always hanging out in the library and *autoporting* into your room like the hounds of Hades are at your heels."

Crap.

She doesn't miss anything.

The only way to get out of this is to dig in deeper on the library cover story.

I flick a warning glance at Troy. Even he can't miss the subtle go-along-with-this-or-suffer-dire-consequences look. He shrugs and backs up a step. Smart boy.

Taking a deep breath, I walk up to him, reach down, and take his hand.

"We've been trying to keep it a secret," I explain.

I look up at Troy, trying to bat my lashes like a lovesick schoolgirl. His face turns bright red and his eyes grow so wide I can see white all the way around. Way to sell it.

If he throws up on me a cursed tongue will be the least of his worries.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity—at least when you're trying to fake romance with your best friend so your other best friend doesn't find out about the golden feather stuffed down your pants—Troy clears his throat and manages the sickliest-looking smile I've ever seen.

"No point in hiding it." He swallows so hard I can hear the gulp. "Sweetie."

"Ha-ha ha-ha!"

Phoebe doubles over with laughter, clutching her stomach like it hurts. I'm pretty sure her eyes are watering.

"Omigods, you guys," she gasps, "that's the funniest thing I've heard all year."

While she gets lost in her hilarity, I yank my hand out of Troy's. Good thing he doesn't want to be an actor. I scowl at him—even though this might not be entirely his fault—and shove him back a step.

"Sorry," he mumbles.

I shake my head. Whatever. It was a dumb idea in the first place, but it was the only thing I could think of to keep her from digging her way to the truth. I should have known Phoebe would see right through it.

"Okay, guys," she says, finally recovering enough to talk. "Now tell me what's *really* going on."

"Nothing," Troy and I say at the same time.

Great, that doesn't make us seem suspicious at all. I glare at him until he bites his lips.

"Nothing's going on, Phoebes," I insist.

If I repeat it enough, eventually she'll have to believe me. Right?

"Seriously, Nicole, I know you're up to something," she replies, all signs of humor vanishing. "So does Damian."

The hair on the back of my neck tingles. "Headmaster Petrolas?"

Troy makes a choking sound.

Great. Of course Phoebe's stepdad—aka the esteemed leader of our illustrious secret school—knows what's going on. He's weirdly intuitive like that. I swear the man has better intelligence skills than the CIA, MI6, and Mossad combined.

"What does he know?" I demand.

"That you stole a book," she replies. "From the secret archives."

"He's going to kill us," Troy croaks.

I cut him a sharp look. "He's not going to do anything to you. You didn't take the book."

Me, on the other hand, he's going to assign to detention for the rest of my life. I'm not the worst-behaved student in school history—I've never set anything on fire or encased a teacher in a block of ice or turned the cafeteria into a nightclub—okay, wait, I did do that last one. But just for one lunch period.

Anyway, I'm not the school delinquent or anything, but I have tried the headmaster's patience. Repeatedly.

"I didn't take the *first* book," Troy whines.

My elbow connects with his ribs before he has time to make a pouty face.

“Ow. What?”

Phoebe’s eyes widen. “You took *two* books?”

Troy casts me a sideways glance. “Oh.”

“He’ll know it was for me,” I insist, trying to make Troy’s color return to normal.

“Either way, he says you won’t be in trouble if you return it—return *them,”* Phoebe corrects. “Just give them back and—”

“I can’t,” I interrupt.

“You can’t?” Phoebe frowns.

“Why not?” Troy asks. “We already know what to—ow!”

I shake my head as Troy protects his ribs. I can’t tell her. I can’t involve her in this. It’s bad enough I’m letting Troy in—at least he’s been a part of this world his whole life. Phoebe’s only known about it for a year.

Besides, we might still need them. Surprise twists and all that.

Phoebe crosses the room to stand in front of me. “Tell me. I want to help.”

I open my mouth and close it again.

“Tell her,” Troy nudges.

Tilting my head back, I stare at the ceiling like I’m going to find some kind of answer there. Nope, nothing but boring white plaster.

“We’re friends,” Phoebe says. “You can trust me.”

“It’s not that,” I blurt. “I trust you, I just . . .”

“Don’t want to involve me,” she finishes.

I nod.

“She didn’t want to involve anyone,” Troy adds.

“Too bad,” she says, surprising me. “Friends don’t only help each other when it’s safe or convenient. Whatever’s going on, I’m in.”

I want to argue, to tell her that this is too dangerous. Too risky. Too important. I’ve already been responsible for ruining too many lives. I don’t want them to risk their futures, too.

One glance at Troy tells me he agrees with Phoebe.

Two against one. He practically blackmailed me into letting him help. She probably would, too. Doesn’t leave me much choice, does it?

“Okay,” I say, walking over to my closet, where the books are safely hidden under a pile of junk. “But you have to promise not to tell your stepdad.”

She scowls. “Do you even have to ask?”

Of course not. I dig the bigger of the two books out of the hiding spot. I only hesitate a second before walking back across the room. When I hand it to Phoebe, she reads the title and her jaw drops.

“You said it wasn’t possible.” She flips open the book and skims the contents. “You said it was ridiculously illegal.”

“It’s both,” I reply.

“Then why—”

She starts to ask the question. Why would I do this? Why would I take such a huge risk?

But then she jerks back, as if it all makes sense.

She glances at Troy, who shrugs and nods.

“Your parents,” she whispers.

I jam my hands in my back pockets. “It’s the only way.”

The gods know I’ve tried everything else. I’ve petitioned Olympus, scoured the legal section of the library, even asked Headmaster Petrolas for advice. The answer was always the same: the decree is irreversible without a unanimous Olympic vote. Hera will never vote in our favor.

If I want to unbanish my parents and bring Griffin’s back to him, I have to try.

“My only chance to make things right,” I say, “is to go back and stop it from happening in the first place.”

Phoebe stares at me for a long time. Like, an insanely long time. I can’t read her thoughts—I mean, I could use *psychospection* if I really wanted to, but that’s rude. Instead, I wait for her to finally speak.

“Changing the past,” she says. “Isn’t that dangerous? Wouldn’t you risk, like, unmaking yourself?”

“I would already be born,” I argue.

“But other things,” she insists. “You could screw up whole time lines that depend on that event happening. My mom used to love this old movie about a time-traveling car and—”

“There are fail-safes.” Troy points at the book. “According to the text, existing time lines are inviolable. Changing something in the past changes it

now, but it still happened then."

"What does that even mean?" I demand.

"I know, I had to read it three times to understand," he says. "But basically, the primordial gods—the ones responsible for all the laws of nature and physics—didn't want time travel to break the space-time continuum. They ensured that going back can't change anything that happened between now and then. Only what happens from now on."

I shake my head. I swear, that boy has too much book learning sometimes.

"You're sure?" Phoebe asks, and I can tell she is really concerned that I will destroy the universe by *chronoporting.*

"I'm sure," Troy promises.

"Think of it this way," I say. "Why would the gods create a power that could unmake all their hard work?"

She considers that for a moment, studies both me and Troy like she's judging how much we believe what we're saying, and then finally relaxes her shoulders.

"This is insane." She waves the book in the air. "Time travel?"

"I know."

I try to snatch the book back from her, but she waves it out of reach.

"That's why I don't want anyone else involved," I explain. "It's too dangerous."

"Troy's involved," Phoebe argues.

I roll my eyes. "Like I could stop him."

Phoebe grins. "Well, you can't stop me, either."

"Thank goodness," Troy cheers and collapses onto my bed.

"You don't have to do this," I tell Phoebe.

"I know," she replies. "But I'm going to."

She sets the book on my desk as she stands, and then pulls me into a hug.

"For you," she whispers, "and for Griffin."

I squeeze her back. She knows me well enough to realize that this isn't just about me or my parents. It's about Griffin's parents, too.

I should have known I could count on Phoebe. She cares about him as much as I do, so it's probably only right that she's helping. With a descendant of the goddess of Victory on my side, how can I fail?

“What about a scuba tank?” Phoebe suggests.

I shake my head. “Not enough air time.”

“Besides,” Troy adds, “the atmospheric pressure would kill her long before she got to the seafloor.”

Phoebe and I both gawk at him.

“What?” He raises his hands in defeat. “I took physics.”

I kick a pebble off the path as we cross campus from the library to Phoebe’s house. We spent the morning working on the next step of the quest—getting a silver seashell from Poseidon’s underwater palace. *All* morning.

According to our research, the hard part isn’t getting the seashell—although I’m sure that won’t be a walk in the sea park. The gods don’t like making things easy for anyone, even their descendants.

No, the hard part is actually *getting* there.

The location of Poseidon’s palace is a carefully guarded secret. Which seems like overkill to me because it’s at the bottom of the seafloor and pretty much impossible to get to unless you belong there.

All I know is that it’s somewhere at the bottom of the Mediterranean.

“We could ask one of his descendants.” Troy chases after the pebble, kicking it back onto the concrete like he’s playing soccer.

My only response is a glare. Troy knows how I feel about those dumber-than-rocks surfer morons. I’d rather drink the entire Mediterranean, boats and all, than try to have a conversation with one of them. One disastrous science-project partnership back in Level 7 was enough togetherness to last my lifetime. And about eight more.

Phoebe ignores my irritation. “What about a submarine?”

“What *about* a submarine?” I echo. “Do you have one hidden away in the harbor?”

“No,” she says with a laugh. “Can’t we *neofacture* one?”

“*Neofact*—” Troy bursts out laughing.

I shake my head. “Not unless you have the complete schematics and the ability to memorize and understand them.”

Phoebe frowns.

“We would have to make sure every last bolt and wire was right,” Troy calms his laughter enough to explain. “None of us has ever built a submarine before, so it would be a huge risk.”

“That’s why it’s easier to *neofacture* small things, like fruit”—I hold out my palm, concentrate, and a moment later a perfect orange appears in my hand—“than big, complex things.”

“Too many variables,” Troy adds.

Phoebe blushes. “Well, how would I know?”

She’s still new to this whole powers-and-the-rules-that-bind-them world. She doesn’t know the ins and outs yet, but she’s learning.

“I could always try getting in touch with a mermaid.” I hook my thumbs in my waistband. “Although I’d have to find one first.”

“Wait,” Phoebe says, turning to walk backward in front of me. “Mermaids are real?”

She sounds so shocked I have to laugh. Greek gods and their descendants and magical powers—that’s totally plausible, but she has trouble believing in mermaids?

“Yeah,” I say. “They are.”

“It’s the heat of summer,” Troy argues. “They’ve probably headed for cooler waters.”

We fall silent as we approach Phoebe’s house.

It shouldn’t be this difficult to get to the underwater palace. Of course, the gods like to make everything difficult, so why would I think this should be any different?

“I haven’t got a clue,” I finally say as Phoebe opens her front door and leads us inside, back to her room. “How in the world am I going to find Poseidon’s palace and get myself down there without drowning?”

Phoebe pushes open the door to her room and I walk inside. I freeze two steps in when I see Griffin sitting on her bed.

Warning sensors blare in my brain. No, it’s not *impossible* that Phoebe’s boyfriend sitting there waiting for her is a total coincidence. But I’ve never been a big believer in coincidence.

“Phoebe?” The warning edge in my voice is unmistakable.

She moves to stand next to Griffin.

“He needs to know.” She takes his hand. “This affects him, too.”

I’m not sure how long I stand there fuming. Long enough for Troy to sneak around me and sink into the chair at Phoebe’s desk. Long enough for the anger to fade from my bloodstream. Long enough for me to process why I’m so freaked about this.

I didn’t want anyone else involved in this stupid quest. First Troy wiggled his way in. Then Phoebe did. Now she’s bringing Griffin in, too. Why don’t we get her stepsister Stella involved? Maybe Stella’s boyfriend Xander, too? How about the whole school?

This quest is too dangerous. I don’t want the responsibility of messing up their lives.

I was supposed to do this alone.

He stands, looking straight at me. “I know how you can get to the palace.”

“You shouldn’t have told him, Phoebe,” I say.

“She didn’t,” Griffin says.

Phoebe shakes her head. “Not all of it. Just the part about the seashell.”

“I told him the rest,” Troy volunteers.

“You what?” I spin on him and am amazed when he doesn’t flinch. He’s just full of courage lately.

“His parents vanished, Nic,” Troy says, his hazel eyes soft with sympathy. “He wants this as much as you do. If this has any chance of working, we need all the help we can get.”

“I deserve to be part of this,” Griffin adds.

They’re right. I know they’re right, but I don’t want them to be. I don’t have a hero complex or anything. I don’t want to be the savior who single-handedly fixes everything. Okay, I do, but that’s not *all* of it. Other people—other people’s emotions—complicate things. I don’t want them risking everything for my mistake. This is my make good.

Still, as much as I want to argue, I know they make a valid point. My parents only got banished from the mythological world. I can still talk to them on the phone, video chat with them on Skype. As soon as I graduate, I’ll be able to see them in real life.

Griffin’s parents got smoted. As in vanished off the face of the earth, never to be heard from again.

He definitely has the greater stake in the time-travel quest. Just because I want to save the day, single-handedly fix everything with no risk to anyone else I care about, doesn’t mean that’s the right way to approach this. Considering how impossible task two is being, I clearly need the help.

I run my hands through my short hair, trying to smooth out my emotions.

“Okay,” I say. “What’s your idea? How do I get to Poseidon’s palace?”

Everyone in the room relaxes.

Griffin smiles. “It just so happens, I know a sea nymph who owes me a favor.”

Great. A sea nymph. They have a history of being . . . temperamental. This is going to be a treat.

The next morning at dawn we meet on the beach. As the sky in front of us melts from flaming orange into brilliant blue, we wait for Griffin’s sea-nymph friend to arrive.

“I’ve never met a sea nymph,” Phoebe says, her voice full of excitement.

“Me neither,” I reply.

Troy adds, “They’re not exactly common on land.”

“How do you know her?” Phoebe asks her boyfriend.

His cheeks turn bright red. “I, um . . .” He glances nervously at me, as if I can help him out here. When I shrug, he says, “When I was fifteen, she saw me on a yacht off the coast of Italy.”

Phoebe’s brows scrunch up. “And . . . ?”

Griffin huffs out a breath. “And she pulled me overboard.”

“She what?” Phoebe gasps.

“She wasn’t trying to kill me,” he insists. “She . . . wanted to keep me.”

Phoebe fumes.

Troy stifles a laugh.

“Obviously she didn’t,” I say, not hiding my smile. “Why does she owe you a favor?”

“It was a big misunderstanding.” He toes his sneaker into the sand. “Everyone thought I’d drowned. There was a huge search party. In the end I had to say I was hiding, in order to keep the media from finding out the truth.”

“You covered for her,” I say.

Phoebe nods, as if saying that sounds like something Griffin would do, and I turn to stare out over the water. My eyes are skimming across the ripples in the surface when Griffin says, “She’s here.”

Phoebe gasps.

Troy makes a kind of choking, sucking sound.

Even I'm a little speechless.

Rising out of the water, about fifty feet out from shore, is the most breathtakingly beautiful creature I have ever seen. She has long, flowing hair the exact color of a shiny copper coin. As she steps out of the water, her hair hangs in wet curls almost to her ankles. Her skin is porcelain perfect, and she has bright green eyes, dark lashes, and rosy pink lips.

She's wearing what looks like a seaweed bikini. A practically nonexistent seaweed bikini.

"Griffin," the nymph says, her entire body smiling his name. "I have been waiting for your call."

"It's good to see you again."

I notice Phoebe edge closer to her boyfriend. When he grabs her hand, the sea nymph's eyes widen.

"Ah," she says. "You have called for the favor, then."

"Yes," Griffin replies.

The nymph gives him a longing once-over, like it practically hurts that he isn't looking for something more. I'll admit, Griffin is pretty much the whole package, if that's what you're looking for. Personally, I like a little less of the catalog-perfect image. Besides, Griffin is practically my brother and he's my best friend's boyfriend.

When the nymph returns her gaze to his face, she sighs. "I made a promise."

"We need to get to Poseidon's palace," Griffin explains.

I step forward. "*I* need to get there."

Griffin flicks me a dark look, but I ignore him.

"Is this your wish?" the nymph asks Griffin.

He nods.

She turns her attention to me. "Few seek the sea god's home successfully."

It takes all my self-control not to say, *That's why we called* you.

She studies me for several long seconds, like she's evaluating me. I clench my fists and straighten under the scrutiny. No way some sea tramp is going to stand in my way. All she'll see when she studies me is strength and determination.

Finally, she says, "Very well."

As she walks up to me, I stand frozen to the spot. Her green eyes are unreadable. I'm not sure what she's going to do—*autoport* me, throw me in the water, or drown me for fun. You never know with a sea nymph.

I refuse to flinch as she stops in front of me and reaches for my face. She wraps her palms around the back of my head before leaning in close. I scowl. What is she going to do, kiss me?

The urge to pull away is overwhelming.

She stops an inch from my face, whispers some indecipherable words, and then exhales slowly.

As I breathe in, I feel a tingle in my throat.

"I have given you *agua respire,*" she says. "You will be able to breathe water for one cycle of the sun."

I nod, unable to form words.

The sea nymph turns back to Griffin. "I will lead her to the palace."

He smiles. "Thank you."

"This shall settle our score?" she asks. When he nods, she turns back to me and takes my hand. "Do not be frightened."

I snort. As if I'm scared of anything.

But as she leads me past my friends, toward the water, a tiny taste of fear touches my tongue. I'm about to go deep into the Mediterranean, to breathe water as I seek a forbidden palace. Phoebe, Griffin, and Troy wave good-bye. I wave back, then follow the nymph into the sea.

I tell myself that panic is a normal reaction. It's not every day a girl tries to breathe water. I'd be more concerned if I wasn't scared. With the sea nymph at my side, I suck in my first lungful of water—bracing for the terror that will come. Water flows in and out of me like I was born to it. She smiles and—before I can adjust to the idea that I'm breathing water—takes off across the seafloor, pulling me with her. We speed over seaweed meadows, through dark, rocky outcroppings, and around fishing lines that reach down from the surface above. She swims faster than any fish I've ever seen.

I'm not sure if she's in a hurry to get this over with or if she's trying to keep me from being able to retrace our steps—or, more accurately, our kicks. Whatever the reason, it seems like only a few minutes have passed when she slows our pace over what looks like an underwater canyon.

“Hold tight,” she says. A heartbeat later we’re diving fast, deep into the canyon below.

We reach the canyon floor in about five seconds and then we’re swimming forward again, weaving through the rocky cliffs at hyperspeed. Suddenly, the canyon walls are gone and we emerge in a massive underwater chamber. A giant cave.

And right smack in the center of the giant cave is a giant castle.

“Poseidon’s palace,” I whisper.

“I can take you no farther,” she says. “You must find your own way inside.”

“Okay,” I say, nodding and trying to give myself courage for the task ahead. “I’ll be as fast as I—”

“To get home,” she interrupts, making it clear she won’t be waiting for me, “follow the canyon path until you can swim for the surface. From there, I believe you can get yourself home.”

Right. Once I’m out of Poseidon’s protection, beyond the range of the magic that defends his palace, I can *autoport* back to Serfopoula.

“Thank you,” I say. “This means a lot—”

She turns and swims away before I can say *to Griffin.* How rude. She didn’t even tell me her name.

But I can’t complain. She got me here, to Poseidon’s palace. That’s all we asked.

Now, I just have to figure out how to get past security, get inside, and get a silver seashell without getting caught.

6

Poseidon's palace is way more intimidating than Mount Olympus. Probably because I've never lived here, never even seen it before. Also because it's underwater, in an impossible-to-find cave, and surrounded by massive statues of sea monsters and trident-wielding mermen.

I swear, all the extra security is wasted. Most people would take one look and turn tail for home.

As I swim toward the palace, it's not hard to locate the main entrance: a pair of silver doors that must be at least fifty feet tall and almost as wide. If Mount Olympus is a testament to marble and gold, Poseidon's palace makes its statement in gray stone and silver. The palace looks like a mash-up of medieval castle and Victorian house, with towers and turrets and odd little statues and balconies everywhere.

Now that I'm here, I have no idea what I'm going to do. According to the nymph I only have twenty-four hours before this becomes an instant drowning situation. I have to act fast. The trouble is I'm going in blind. We couldn't find any blueprints of this palace lying around the library—at least not anywhere *I* could access, since Troy's secret girlfriend (gag) was nowhere to be found. I won't be finding any secret entrances down here.

Even if I get inside, I don't have the first clue where to find the silver seashell. In a place this huge, it could take months to *see* every room, let alone search them all.

It would take me half an hour to swim around the perimeter. I don't have that kind of time.

I look up at the massive silver doors. This is insane. The whole quest is insane. Time travel? I have to be completely nuts to even think I can make this happen.

But for me, courage—and crazy—have never been in short supply. I know why I'm doing this, and nothing is going to stop me.

I just have to put myself on the line a little.

“Think, Nicole,” I mutter.

How do I get inside? I can’t break in. One push on a silver door reveals that it must weigh twenty tons. Even if it wasn’t pressured on both sides by a sea full of water, it would be impossible to force open. I’m not moving that.

Maybe I can sneak in.

Swimming away from the entrance, I head toward the nearest balcony. If I’m lucky—*ha!*—the door will be unlocked and I can be inside in seconds.

I don’t even make it to the balcony before smacking face-first into some invisible force. I press my palms against some kind of magical protection. I swim a few feet in either direction, but the field surrounds the entire palace. A supernatural security shield. Probably put in place to keep out thieves like me.

Great, no sneaking in for me.

If I can’t break in and I can’t sneak in . . . that leaves only one option.

Kicking my way back down to the doors, I suck in a breath of water, tighten up my courage, and raise my hand to grab one of the bull-shaped silver door knockers—why the god of the sea would choose a land mammal as one of his sacred symbols is beyond me. I only hesitate half a second before banging the knocker against the door. All in.

“No going back now.”

I wait, listening for any sounds from the other side of the doors. Not that I could hear an explosion through them. The water would muffle everything anyway.

I start counting in my head. When I get to fifty, I start thinking maybe no one is home. Maybe the palace is closed for the summer or something.

By seventy I’m pretty sure this is a lost cause.

At one hundred, my shoulders slump. What am I going to do? Between the fortress-like doors and the magic force field, getting into this palace is impossible. If no one answers I don’t know what else to try. I start to turn away, defeated. As I do, a swirl of current whips past me and spins me back around.

I find myself face-to-face with what looks like a palace guard. It’s not an impressive guess since he’s wearing a navy-blue uniform jacket that

matches his navy-blue tail fin and is decorated with almost as much silver as the palace itself.

"State your purpose," he says.

"What?" I ask before I can stop myself.

"Your purpose," he repeats. "Why do you visit the sea god's home?"

I'm so overwhelmed by the fact that someone is actually here and the door is open, that at first I can only stare.

He clears his throat. Loudly.

"Oh," I say, coming back to my senses. Shoot, I hadn't thought this far ahead. What should I say? I can't simply ask for a seashell. What would any other *hematheos* come to this palace for? Why would they make this risky journey?

Without waiting to think up something tactical, I blurt, "I would like an audience with the sea god." The guard's eyes widen, but I nod. "I would like to speak with Poseidon."

I expect him to slam the door in my face. Or maybe set the sea dogs after me. Who am I to ask for an audience with a god-king?

But the guard bows his head and says, "Please wait here."

He closes the door and I can only guess he's going to see if he has to let me in or if he can send me away. I don't bother counting this time. The palace is huge—it could take him an hour to swim to the back. Instead, I amuse myself by studying the weird sculptures covering the palace. There are a lot of bulls and horses—another one of Poseidon's sacred symbols—and plenty of half-naked mermaids. Typical.

But there are also lots of serpents and sea monsters, creatures with mixed-up features like the front half of a horse and the tail of a fish. There are about a million actual seashells inlaid into the palace walls. Not one of them is silver.

I float over to the statue of a beautiful woman, her mouth open like she's singing an opera. A siren, one of the evil women who uses song to lure sailors to their deaths.

The sculpture is so realistic I can almost hear the—

"Be careful."

Heart pounding, I spin around at the sound of the guard's voice.

"You do not wish to wake the sleeping siren."

I glance back at the sculpture—lifelike for a reason, apparently—and kick myself slowly away. I'm not a sailor and at the moment I can't drown, but I'm not about to tempt fate.

"Sorry," I mutter as I swim back over to the guard.

"The sea god will see you now," the guard says, as if I hadn't almost roused a murderous creature.

"Good," I say, trying to act like I knew he would.

Inside, my heart and my mind are racing. Great, I've got an audience with Poseidon. Now what?

"I need a silver seashell."

Did that just come out of my mouth? Seriously?

As the guard led me to the throne room, I tried to think of some reasonable way to ask for the seashell without having to explain why. I could pretend I was a jeweler who wanted to make a necklace in his honor. Or that I was trying to win a merman's love. But never once did I think to blurt out my request without preamble until, well, it blurted out of me without preamble.

I feel my eyes widen as Poseidon studies me from the other side of his massive desk. It's at least as big as Zeus's and covered with as much clutter.

Sometimes I really need to think twice before speaking. Or at least once. I should try it someday. I'm going to get myself smoted.

"I mean, I was wondering if there's any way I could—"

He holds up his hand and I stop midsentence. He looks so much like Zeus right now it's easy to see that they're brothers. Same square face, flowing gray hair, and intense stare. Except where Zeus's eyes are stormy gray, Poseidon's are deep sea blue.

"If you seek such a gift," he finally says, "you must give a gift in return."

A gift? I didn't think to bring anything with me. I'm lucky I even thought enough ahead to leave my phone in my room. I tend to act first and figure it out later—shocking, I know.

"I'm sorry," I admit. "I don't have anything."

He smiles. "But of course you do."

Now why is the hair on the back of my neck standing up again?

He waves me closer to his desk. I inch forward, more than a little nervous to find out what he has in mind. I've heard plenty of stories from the old days—the *really* old days—when the gods were pretty much full-time hound dogs. How do you think we got so many *hematheos* in the first place? If he tries something, I'll have to break out some long-lost martial arts moves.

But when I approach, he does nothing more than pull a silver seashell from his drawer and set it on his desk. I stare at the shell, seriously calculating the odds of grabbing it and getting out of the palace before he can stop me.

Very, very low.

"I have a daughter," he begins, then laughs. "I have many daughters, but there is one."

His eyes get this far-off, dreamy look, and I can tell that he loves this daughter more than all the others combined. Kinda sucks for the rest of the family, but she must be one special girl.

"She is an angel," he continues. "Sees no evil in men."

And by *men* he means one man in particular.

I get it. Naive daughter of one of the most powerful gods who ever lived. Less-than-naive guy who wants her for less-than-honorable reasons.

"You think she's being conned?" I suggest.

"I—" Poseidon smiles and shakes his head. "Yes, that is it precisely."

I watch him, waiting for him to explain what this has to do with me getting the seashell. What this has to do with my forgetting a gift.

He doesn't speak, just sits there staring at the shell like he expects it to start talking to him.

"I'm sorry," I finally say, "but I don't get what that has to do with me. How can I possibly help?"

I have a sudden image of being asked to play cheat-catcher, acting as bait to lure the suspected con artist into hitting on me. So not my area of expertise. I'm better at scaring boys away.

"I would like you to tell me her future," he says.

I twist my head sideways. Tell him her future? What am I, a fortune-teller?

"You've made a mistake," I explain, backing away a step. "I can't see the future."

No, I’m trying to go back and fix the past.

“You have powers you do not yet realize.”

Poseidon reaches out and takes my hand, stopping my retreat. The moment his fingers touch me, my brain explodes with an intense image. I see a girl—a breathtakingly beautiful girl who could only be the daughter of a god—walking on a beach. As the image focuses in my mind, I see that she is walking hand in hand with a boy.

“What do you see?” Poseidon asks softly.

I don’t stop to ask how he knows I’m seeing something.

“A girl with pale blond hair and pretty green eyes,” I describe.

“My daughter,” Poseidon confirms. “What else?”

“She’s walking on the beach with a boy.” I squint my eyes, as if that will make the mental picture clearer. “He has dark blond hair and”—the image zooms in on his face—“a tattoo on the back of his neck.”

“That is the boy.” Poseidon releases my hand. “The *con* artist.”

The modern term sounds awkward in his accented voice.

The image fades and I open my eyes. “I—” I shake my head, not sure how I could possibly know this, but I feel it like a certainty in my gut. “He isn’t a con artist.”

“No?”

I shrug. “They seem . . .” I study the picture of the girl and the blissful smile on her beautiful face. “Happy.”

“Happy,” Poseidon echoes.

I can’t tell if he’s relieved or disappointed. Personally, I’m confused. What the heck just happened? One touch from a god and suddenly I’m seeing things I shouldn’t be able to know?

“Thank you,” he says, picking up the silver seashell and offering it to me. “It was not the answer I sought, but it is . . . acceptable.”

I let out a huge—water-filled—sigh of relief. Seems like I passed the test.

I reach out to take the seashell. Before I can grab it, Poseidon moves his hand back a few inches. When I look up, ready to call him out for pulling a dirty trick, he is giving me a serious look.

“You of all people, Nicole Matios,” he says, shocking the ever-loving crap out of me by knowing my name, “of all *hematheos,* should know that some things happen for reasons beyond our control.”

“I, um . . .”

Crazy guy says what? What kind of cryptic nonsense is that? Sure, the old guy gets points for knowing my name, but that ominous threat is filed under *none of his business.* He must be totally off the rails. If this all goes wrong at the last moment, I’m going to be seriously annoyed.

But Poseidon doesn’t spout any more of his crazy talk. He holds the seashell back within my reach.

I snatch it before he can yank it away again.

“Thanks,” I say, clutching the seashell in my fist.

I turn and swim for the door as fast as my mediocre swimming skills will take me. It’s not until I’m out of the palace, through the canyon, and kicking to the surface that I let out a sigh of relief. I did it. I actually got the silver seashell.

As I break through into the salty air, I don’t hesitate. I *autoport* back to Serfopoula, back to my friends, with the edges of the shell digging into my palm.

7

It's late when I get back and the beach is deserted, so I go ahead and *autoport* back to my room. After placing the seashell in the desk drawer next to the feather, I grab my phone and send the gang a quick text to let them know I'm back safe.

A phone beeps from the vicinity of my always-messy bed.

Scowling, I cross the room and yank the comforter away. There's Troy, sprawled across my sheets, sleeping like a little baby.

"Hey," he says, rolling over and squinting into the light. "You're back."

I don't bother confirming the obvious. "How did you get in here?"

I swear I reset my protections after last time.

He sits up, rubs his eyes with one hand, and waves at the window with the other.

"I'm on the third floor," I argue while he stifles a yawn.

"I know." He gives me a lopsided grin. "I *neofactured* a ladder."

I give up. With a resigned shake of my head, I drop into the chair at my desk. "Clearly I need to up my security."

Troy ignores my grumble. "Did you get it?"

I yank the drawer back open and hold up the seashell.

"How?" he asks. "Was it hard?"

"Not really," I answer.

All it took was a bizarro mental movie of Poseidon's daughter. I have no idea what that was all about, and part of me wants to share that with Troy. Not that he would understand any more than I do, but it's making me a little crazy to keep it inside.

What would I say? Poseidon touched me and I saw—what? The future? The past? I don't even know.

It had to be something supernatural. I've never seen this daughter of Poseidon before, but according to him I described her—and her boyfriend—perfectly. And whatever I saw, it was enough to appease the sea god.

Still, it's . . . weird. To say the least.

Instead of telling Troy something I can't explain, I tell him the rest of the story—from the moment I left the beach until I *autoported* home.

"All I did was ask for it," I say. "He was pretty reasonable, as far as Olympians go."

"Wow, that's—" Troy shakes his head. "Wow."

I nod my head. "I know."

He reaches for the seashell and I let him take it. It doesn't look like anything special. Just an ordinary seashell that happens to be silver. I get the feeling the offerings are more about the effort than the objects themselves. While Troy turns the shell over in his hand, my mind drifts to the next step.

Apparently, so does his.

"So . . ." he says, holding the seashell up for a closer look. "Hades?"

I draw in a full breath. "Hades."

"That's going to be—"

"Impossible," I interrupt. "I'll add it to the list."

I grab the seashell back, drop it in the drawer with the feather, and slam the thing shut.

"This isn't the same as Poseidon's palace," Troy says, reclining back on my bed. "The underworld is a whole different ball game."

I sigh. "I'm trying not to think about that."

Hades. The underworld. The land of the dead.

Not exactly a choice vacation spot. In fact, other than descendants of Hades and his too-stupid-to-live bride Persephone and participants in a ridiculous survival game held on the island every summer, no one but the dead ever enters Hades because no one can ever leave.

"There has to be a way," I insist. "Otherwise why would that be a required step?"

"I don't like it," Troy says. Before I can tell him I don't care if he doesn't like it, he says, "But we'll figure it out."

He pats the bed and I move to sit next to him. Our arms touch and I feel myself relax. I've never felt as comfortable with anyone as I do with Troy. Suddenly, the exhaustion of the day—of this whole quest—hits me and I find my eyes sagging.

"We'll get everyone together tomorrow," he continues, his voice lulling me to sleep. "We will figure out how to get you to Hades."

“And back,” I murmur, letting my head fall onto his shoulder.

“And back,” he repeats.

As I drift to sleep, images of golden feathers and silver seashells dance in my mind. With my friends at my side—with Troy at my side—I have no doubt that ruby pomegranate seeds will be mine before long.

Redemption, too.

Just as the last of my consciousness succumbs to sleep, I feel Troy’s hand slide under mine. I smile and then I’m out.

We decide to meet at Phoebe’s house the next morning. Mostly because the idea of having so many people in my room makes me itchy. Also because we are less likely to be overheard here than in the dorm or the library. Even on summer break, there are still some students on campus.

At Phoebe’s, we only have to worry about her mom—not really a concern, because she doesn’t know enough about this world to freak out; her stepdad—a major problem, because Headmaster Petrolas knows everything about this world, but luckily he’s in Athens on business; and her stepsister—another major know-it-all problem, but Stella tends to make herself scarce when we’re around. Besides, she’s busy getting ready to leave for Oxford in a few weeks.

Phoebe and I are counting the days.

“I found a site that says the Romans believed the entrance to Hades was through Lake Avernus in Italy.” Phoebe looks away from the computer screen and smiles at us. “Road trip?”

I shake my head.

“Can’t trust anything the Romans say,” Troy says without looking up from the atlas he’s reading.

Griffin looks up from the prehistoric-looking book on mythology he found in the nonsecret collection at the library. “They got everything wrong.”

I flip through another useless book, filled with all the standard mythological stories about Hades. Kidnapping Persephone, Odysseus’s odyssey, Orpheus trying to bring Eurydice back from the dead. Nothing helpful.

“Here’s something,” Griffin says. He reads from his book. “Supposedly, there is an entrance to Hades in Abyssos, the realm of monsters.”

“Realm of monsters?” I ask. That doesn’t sound fun.

“I’ve heard of that,” Troy says. “It’s where all the gods banished monsterkind after Medusa’s murder.”

“Murder?” Phoebe asks.

“It’s a long story,” I explain. “But how would we get to Abyssos?”

“It says there’s a door . . .” Griffin reads ahead, and then his face falls. “Oh. It says the door has been lost for millennia.”

“Great,” I mutter.

Square one.

“You know,” Troy says, “Hades isn’t the only god with access to the underworld. You could always call—”

“Shut it,” I growl before he says too much.

He should know that what he’s suggesting is not an option. Not. An. Option.

“Are you sure your *girlfriend* can’t help us out?” I ask, just to torment him.

Phoebe sits up straighter. “Troy has a girlfriend?”

“A *secret* one,” I tease.

“I don’t have a girlfriend,” he says, turning his attention back to the atlas.

I smirk. Score one for Nicole.

Everyone returns to their searching. I’m about to read the story of how Hades kidnapped Persephone, how the biggest idiot in all of mythology cursed herself into spending three-quarters of eternity trapped in the underworld with her kidnapper—Stockholm syndrome much?—when Phoebe’s bedroom door swings open.

“Phoebe, did you take my—”

We all freeze at the intrusion of Phoebe’s stepsister into our lair.

Stella stops midsentence when she sees us scattered around the room, guiltily trying to hide the evidence of our research. She scans her steely gray eyes over the crowd and when her glare gets to me, it narrows.

I growl. We don’t have the best history.

“What’s going on here?” the queen *B*—and I don’t mean the bumble kind—demands.

“Nothing,” Phoebe, Griffin, and Troy insist.

“Seriously?” Stella rolls her eyes. “You three fail at lying.”

She studies each of us in turn, giving Phoebe, then Griffin and Troy, her most withering look. Choosing her victim wisely, she walks up to Troy, who is—literally—starting to shake.

"Troy," she says in a voice far sweeter than should be possible for someone as sour as Stella, "what is the Greek squad up to?"

"I—um—well—we—" Hazel eyes wide, he looks wildly around the room for help.

If I don't step in he's liable to spill the whole story.

"It's nothing, wicked witch," I answer, trying to save him from more distress. "Go back to your evil castle and ask your monkeys to give you a makeover."

Stella turns to me and flashes an unamused smile. "Always quick to his defense, rebel girl. Makes a girl wonder if you two are more than friends?"

Phoebe turns to stare wide-eyed at me. Griffin clears his throat and Troy studies the ceiling. Even though my heart is thumping in my chest, I force myself to stay calm on the outside.

"Did you need something?" I ask. "Or did you just come in here to interrogate us?"

"If I wanted to interrogate you," she replies, "you'd know it. Now, tell me what's going on or I'll make the Spanish Inquisition look like tea with the queen."

Phoebe, Griffin, and Troy all blurt out answers at once.

"We're planning a party."

"It's a summer research project."

"Book club."

Stella shakes her head and keeps her focus on me. For several long moments we have a serious stare-down. Her gray eyes meeting my blue ones. It's part battle of wills and part battle of powers. I can tell she's trying to *psychospection* her way into my thoughts.

Don't even think about it, I *psychodictate* back into her snobby blond head.

She arches one dark blond brow.

Tell me, she says.

There's nothing to—

Don't bother lying, she interrupts. *I inherited my father's deception detector.*

I suck in a tight breath, and scowl harder. If there are two things I know about Stella Petrolas it's that her mind-reading powers are unequaled and that when she smells a juicy secret she's like Cerberus with a freakin' bone. She won't back off until we come clean, and it'll be easier if we do it sooner rather than later.

Fine.

"We're trying to find a way into Hades."

Phoebe gasps.

Griffin laughs.

Troy looks at me like I've lost my mind.

I probably have. I'm not sure why I decided it was easier to give in. Maybe because if I didn't she would probe my brain until she found out on her own. This at least gives me a chance at controlling the conversation.

Her only response is to ask, "Why?"

I stiffen my spine before answering. All in.

"Because I need ruby pomegranate seeds for an offering to Chronos." When she tilts her head a fraction to the right, I add, "So I can travel back in time and stop my parents from getting banished."

I clench my jaw.

As I watch Stella's reaction, I expect her to be outraged. To act all snooty and superior and then run tattle to her headmaster daddy, but not before she gives us a scathing lecture on breaking one of the unbreakable rules.

Scathing lectures are her favorite pastime.

I think we're all holding our breath.

If Stella turns us in, we'll all pay the price. It was a stupid move. I should have kept my mouth shut and just focused on blocking her out of my brain. We're all done for now.

After the longest silence of my life, Stella walks to the door. I shake my head, waiting for her to run to phone her father and tell on us.

Instead, she closes the door, turns back to face us, and says, "Without my help, you'll wind up rotting in an Olympic dungeon."

"Or trapped in Hades for all eternity," Troy offers.

I cut him a sharp scowl. Returning my attention to Stella, I sneer. "*You* want to help?"

When she nods, I turn to my friends for support.

They seem just as confused by her response as I am. The last thing I expected from Stella was an offer to help. But if she's offering, I'm not going to turn her down. We're at a dead end.

"Great." I cross my arms over my chest. "If you have any brilliant ideas for finding a way *into* Hades, I'm all ears."

"I don't," she says, walking over to a chair in the corner of the room, "but I know someone who does."

"Who?" I ask.

She grins. "My boyfriend."

For the love of Zeus, why don't we involve the entire island in my superillegal quest? This is getting ridiculous. But if Stella thinks Xander Katara will have a solution, then let's add one more to the circle.

Honestly, I can't imagine anywhere I want to go *less* than Hades. Not for the normal reasons—the whole rotting, gloomy land-of-death-and-despair-that-I-might-never-come-back-from thing. No, Hades is at the top of my must-avoid list for one simple reason: Persephone.

She's pretty much an embarrassment to all womankind. What kind of vapid airhead gets herself trapped in the underworld because she can't help herself from popping a few pomegranate seeds for the journey home? Talk about lack of willpower.

Most of the world pities her. I think she's a moron.

I've never met the twit, but if her descendants are any indication she makes fruit flies look like geniuses. I sat next to one in Level 10 math, and let's just say that on a good day she could count to one hundred. A few of them have book smarts. None of them have the common sense the gods gave an olive tree.

"How is Xander going to help?" Phoebe asks, interrupting my less-than-generous thoughts as we wait for him and Stella to meet us at the entrance to the school stadium.

"He's a descendant of Narcissus," Griffin says.

Phoebe shakes her head, still confused.

"When Hades wanted to bring Persephone into the underworld," Troy explains, "he used Narcissus to lure her."

"As his descendant," I add, "Katara has insider info on exactly how Narcissus did that."

“Huh.” Phoebe shrugs, as if she doesn’t quite get it, but has gotten used to not understanding things in this world.

It’s better that way. Most of this world isn’t worth understanding.

“I still can’t get used to the idea that Stella has a boyfriend,” Phoebe whispers.

“Katara’s twisted,” I offer. “He has to be to put up with—”

“Good morning,” Stella’s too-bright voice singsongs across the field.

As I turn to face her, I can tell she heard—or sensed—what I was about to say. It’s a sign of her new, nonevil attitude that she doesn’t comment.

“Hey, Phoebe,” Xander says as they walk up. “Nicole.”

Phoebe waves.

“Katara,” I reply.

It definitely takes a crazy person to willingly put up with Stella on a regular basis. She hasn’t been entirely awful lately, but she’s near the top of the high-maintenance scale. Judging from the way he looks at her, he’s okay with that.

“You really want to go into Hades?” he asks me.

Want? Hardly. I’d rather endure a solid year of Headmaster Petrolas’s detentions. But I will do anything to get my parents unbanished and Griffin’s unsmoted. Anything. I would sentence myself to an eternity in the underworld if it means undoing my biggest mistake—my biggest regret.

“Yes,” I say. “I *really* want to go to Hades.”

“You’re sure?” Troy asks.

I give him a stop-asking-stupid-questions look. He should be tired of asking them. I’m done having that debate.

He crosses his arms over his chest. “Then I’ll go with you.”

I say, “No,” at the same time Xander says, “No way.”

“Why not?” Troy asks Xander, ignoring me.

“Sorry, buddy,” Xander replies. “Family secret. It’s a big enough no-no taking one outsider in.”

Troy deflates a little.

“You’ll take care of her?” he asks, still talking to Xander. “You’ll get her there and back in one piece?”

Griffin snorts with barely controlled laughter until Phoebe elbows him in the ribs.

I punch Troy in the arm. Since when do I need anyone to take care of me?

“I’ll do my best,” Xander promises, so I punch him in the arm, too.

He’s got a lot more muscle.

“Can we go already?” I ask as I shake out my fist.

Stella grabs Xander by the hand and pulls him into her arms. When their lips touch, I turn away from the don’t-want-*that*-burned-into-my-memory display.

Troy steps in front of me.

“Be careful down there,” he says.

“I’ll be fine,” I insist. “You know me—not even a Hesperian dragon can keep me down.”

I learned that lesson the hard way.

“I’m serious.” Troy steps even closer. “Come back to me in one piece.”

A sarcastic quip is on the tip of my tongue, but something about his tone makes me hold it in. Troy is a worrier, sure, but he’s not usually so serious. So intense.

It’s almost too much.

From the corner of my eye, I see Phoebe take Griffin’s hand.

They’re all worried about me. I get that. But they should know me well enough to believe that I won’t let myself fail.

“I will be fine,” I say, pronouncing each word precisely, trying to assure myself as much as Troy. I jerk my head back over my shoulder. “Are they done yet?”

Troy peers around me. “Nope, not—oh, wait, I think they’re—no, still going.”

“Very funny,” Stella says, coming to stand next to me.

He grins. “I thought so.”

I laugh.

His ability to laugh at himself is one of the reasons Troy and I are best friends. Too many people take the inconsequential stuff too seriously. He always lightens the mood.

“Let’s do this thing,” Xander says.

“We’ll be back”—I give Troy a helpless shrug—“as soon as we’re back.”

He nods.

Xander holds out his hand. “Ready?”

“As I’ll ever be,” I reply, flashing Troy one last smile.

I place my palm in Xander’s and instantly we’re no longer standing at the base of the stadium. We’re in a beautiful green meadow full of small white flowers.

Xander gestures at the flowers. “Welcome to the family secret.”

“What is it?” I ask.

“This is the field of narcissus,” Xander explains, “that Hades planted to entrap Persephone. The flowers mark the location of a secret entrance to the underworld. An entrance that bypasses Chiron and the River Styx, direct to Hades’s black palace.”

These beautiful flowers are really a signpost to the underworld? That’s messed up.

Xander leads me forward, closer to the flowers.

“This is the door through which Hades first abducted the goddess of spring.” He steps into the center of the field of flowers. “And it’s the door through which she leaves and returns each year.”

As he speaks, the green meadow and the blue sky melt away, replaced by dark stone and red glow. The overwhelming stench of decay can mean only one thing: we are in Hades.

8

The black palace stretches high above me, like a mountain of shadow. Boy, the god-kings sure don't scrimp on their royal residences. Although to be honest, if I had to live in the underworld I'd want to live in a freakin' mansion, too. Inside, it's supposed to be an escape from the surrounding world of death.

"We have to find the Hall of Springtime," I tell Xander. According to *Offerings to the Gods*, the ruby pomegranate seeds are inlaid within the mosaic wall that spans one side of the hall. It's supposed to be a beautiful scene of flowers and birds and animals and everything that represents springtime in the world above—a huge, artistic reminder for Persephone so she doesn't get too homesick during the nine months of every year she's stuck down here.

"How are we supposed to find it?" he asks. "This place is huge."

None of the sketches in any of the books did this place justice. It's expansive. If I hadn't read so many descriptions or studied the one rough sketch of a map we found in an ancient scroll, I'd be intimidated.

"This is how."

I pull a copy of the map I found out of my back pocket and scan the route Troy and I marked.

"We're somewhere near here," I say, pointing to a small side entrance to the palace. "We just have to get inside, follow this red line, and we'll be out of here in no time."

"That easy?" Xander asks, skeptical.

"Probably not," I reply, stuffing the map back into my pocket. "But a little optimism never hurt anyone."

I walk up to the normal-sized door, reach for the handle, and—despite my attempt to think positive—fully expect it to be locked. After all, why would breaking into Hades's palace be as simple as walking in?

When the handle turns and the door swings inside, I exchange a shocked look with Xander.

He shrugs. “Guess the optimism is working.”

“Or it’s a trap.”

“Yeah,” he says, eying the hallway within. “Or that.”

Well, whatever the case, I’m not waiting around to find out. I want to get in, get out, and get back to the world above.

Pushing aside my concerns, I step through the doorway and into the palace. Nothing happens. No blaring alarms or three-headed dogs or even a squeaky floorboard. Nothing.

Looks like we’re in the clear.

“Time to follow the red line,” I whisper.

I lead the way down the hall, making sure my boots don’t squeak or clomp on the floor. Xander moves just as silently behind me. We reach the end of the narrow hallway without incident—without seeing another soul, living or dead. When the hallway opens onto a larger one, I peer around the corner both ways before declaring the coast clear.

As I hurry through this hallway, heading for the entrance hall that will lead to the ballroom that will lead to the Hall of Springtime, I notice the similarities—and differences—between this palace and the other two I’ve visited recently. In many ways it is just as opulent, with expensive finishes, priceless art, and classical touches everywhere. But where Mount Olympus was painted with gold and Poseidon’s palace painted with silver, this palace seems to be painted with black. But not a normal black. The black accents gleam, like they’re carved from shiny stone.

“I’ve never seen so much obsidian,” Xander says as we turn down another hall.

Obsidian. That’s it. The shiny black stone is actually volcanic rock, polished smooth. Which makes sense, since the underworld is swimming in lava and volcanoes.

“We’re almost there,” I whisper as we reach the entrance hall.

The tile floor is a red-and-black checkerboard, framed within a border of glittering rubies, garnets, and stones that look like black diamonds. I swear, a good thief could live a lifetime on a square foot of stones from one of these palaces. The gods should really use their wealth for more than a disgusting display of expensive things.

At the far end of the entrance hall stands a pair of steel gray doors covered in carvings of mythological creatures. At the center of each door panel is a carving of Cerberus, the three-headed dog that guards the underworld from intruding humans. Twin three-headed dogs doesn't seem the most inviting entrance, but hey, who am I to judge?

"It's weird," Xander says as we move quickly to the ballroom doors. "We haven't seen a single person since we got here."

"Yeah, well," I say, reaching for the handle of the door on the right and finding it, thankfully, unlocked, "I guess Hades isn't quite the social hot spot it used to be."

I don't take time to look around. And I don't bother quieting my bootsteps in the empty space as I race across the room to the curtain-covered back wall. Stopping at the center, I peel back the heavy red drape, looking for the alcove that—according to the map—contains the door to the Hall of Springtime.

Instead, I find only a solid black wall being guarded by sleeping giant.

I start to back out away from the alcove, but the giant's eyes blink open. I expect him to yell for help or make a grab for me. But when his gaze doesn't find me—doesn't even look for me—I notice that he has no irises. No pupils.

He's blind.

"Who seeks to pass?" the blind giant asks, his deep voice echoing in the small alcove.

I glance back over my shoulder. Xander shrugs and gives me a helpless look.

No turning back now.

"Nicole Matios," I say, and mentally cross my fingers.

"Speak the password, Nicole Matios," the giant says.

"Password?" I echo.

Crap. I don't know the password. Nothing ever said anything about a stupid password. I knew things were going too smoothly.

"I, um—" I glance back at Xander, who shrugs and shakes his head. He's just as clueless as I am.

"I forgot," I say. "Sorry."

"Then you must solve the riddle," the giant says. "None but my master and his bride can know the answer."

Great. How on earth—or in Hades—am I supposed to solve a riddle that only Hades himself and dingbat Persephone could know the answer to? It's not like I have any other options, though. The ruby pomegranate seeds I need are in the hall somewhere behind this guard. I have to try.

"Okay," I say. "Shoot."

"Name the power that binds Queen Persephone to the underworld."

"Name the power?" I echo. "Um, give us a sec."

I grab Xander by the sleeve and pull him a few feet away from the alcove, letting the curtain fall back into place to give us some privacy for discussion.

"What does he mean?" I ask. "The power that binds her? What keeps her in Hades?"

Xander jams his hands into his jeans pockets. "I don't know. It could mean the pomegranate seeds," he suggests. "She has to stay here nine months a year because she ate them."

"That seems too simple." And again, when it comes to the gods nothing is simple. "It could be Olympic decree. The gods decided the terms of her sentence."

"Or the Fates." Xander's face lights up with inspiration. "Supposedly, it was the Fates who decided that anyone who ate something while in Hades could never leave."

Pomegranate seeds. The Olympians. The Fates?

They all seem possible.

But they all seem . . . easy. Nothing about those choices is a secret. They're not things only Hades and Persephone would know. Those are details from the common myths.

"It has to be something more obscure," I insist.

I start pacing.

How am I going to figure this out? I've come this far, collected two of the three objects. I can't fail now. I won't give up.

All at once, the sheer impossibility of my quest hits me. I've done two impossible things already; I'm not sure I can pull off a third. And then what? After I get the objects, I still have to call on Chronos and then my ancestor god. Won't that be fun? The book was pretty vague after that. Who knows what I will face if I ever get the pomegranate seeds and get the chance to call the god of time.

I stop midpace and cover my face with my hands.

I was stupid to even think I could pull this off.

As I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to block out the tears of despair that I feel tingling, I try to stop thinking about the big picture—the pressure and the desperation to undo what I did all those years ago. Instead, I think about the current step, the next action I'm trying to complete.

The pomegranate seeds.

If I think about Chronos and time travel and changing everything that happened in the last ten years, it's overwhelming. The pomegranate seeds seem easy in comparison.

My mind relaxes, and as it does it fills with an image.

I see a man—tall, strong, broad-shouldered, with long, flowing dark hair and a matching beard. He reminds me of Zeus and Poseidon, which means he can only be Hades.

He is looking at something. In the vision, I turn. No, he's looking at some*one*.

At Persephone.

Pale blond hair and airy green dress blowing behind her as she races toward him. Her eyes are wide, desperate. Happy.

I look back and forth between the two gods, amazed at the emotion burning in their eyes, burning for each other. When Persephone reaches Hades, she flings her arms around his neck, and he wraps his around her waist.

With a gasp, I pull out of the vision, back into the ballroom.

I turn to Xander, unable to hide my grin. "I know."

Racing back over to the alcove, I yank back the curtain and shout, "Love!" I laugh. "It's love that binds Persephone to Hades."

I hold my breath until the guard nods and steps to the side of the alcove. Behind him, the black stone wall transforms into an archway.

"Come on," I yell at Xander. "Let's get those pomegranate seeds."

The room is spectacular. Even compared to Mount Olympus and Poseidon's palace, it is breathtaking in its splendor. Descriptions in the sources Troy and I found must have been only guessing at what the Hall of Springtime really looks like, because they aren't even close.

Mirrors line the walls on all sides, kind of like the fancy hall of mirrors at the Palace of Versailles. Weaving in and around and among the mirrors are inlaid mosaics of emerald-leafed trees with gold trunks and branches. The branches hang heavy with ruby-seeded pomegranates. The gemstone trees reach all the way to the ceiling—I mean *all* the way. It has to be at least thirty feet above my head.

It's like being within the canopy of a gemstone forest. This must be what the Emerald City in *The Wizard of Oz* really looks like.

Through the branches, I see a sky of aquamarines and other pale blue gems. There is a giant golden sun—formed by real gold and amber-colored topaz. I swear I feel the heat from its glow.

The floor beneath me is a flowing river of sapphires, with pearl and opal whitewater rapids. As I watch the water, it actually moves, undulating like a real river. I even see the little movements of fish beneath the surface.

"This is incredible," Xander says, trying to take all of it in at once.

That is the understatement of the century.

For a moment—a *looong* moment—I'm caught up in the beauty and magic of the room. But as I watch the tree branches sway in a magical breeze, big, fat pomegranates bouncing around on the verge of falling, I force myself to remember why I'm here.

"We need to get the seeds," I say, breaking the spell. "Fast."

Just because we got ourselves inside the hall doesn't mean it's all cake from here.

"How?" Xander asks. "Those pomegranates must be two stories in the air."

"We'll have to improvise."

I walk to the wall and study one of the gem-crusted trees. It's a full, three-dimensional version, as if they took a real tree and dipped it in jewels.

"I can climb it," I say. I motion Xander over to my side. "Give me a boost."

"Are you sure?" he asks, lacing his fingers together to form a step.

I place my boot in his palms and, bracing my arms on his head, push myself up. A few seconds of grappling later, I'm standing on his shoulders and reaching for the trunk.

Xander braces his hands against the wall while I pull my weight off him and onto the tree.

When I get to the first fruit-bearing branch, I climb out until I can reach the nearest pomegranate and yank. The branch sways beneath me, but the fruit stays securely attached. I try pushing with as much of my weight as I can without losing my balance, but I reach too far. In an instant, I'm dangling from the ceiling, the fruit still clinging on.

"Are you okay?" Xander shouts.

"Fine," I call out, holding on to the pomegranate with all my strength.

I swing my legs, making the branch bounce, hoping a little extra momentum will dislodge the fruit. The thing is not letting go of its branch, no matter how hard I pull.

"You wanna play tough?" I grumble at the gemstone pomegranate. I glance down at Xander, anxiously standing below me like he expects me to fall at any moment. "Can you catch me?"

"Yeah," he answers. "Why?"

"Get ready."

Swinging my legs harder, I manage enough of an arc to hook one boot back up over the unforgiving limb. I place the other boot against the bottom of the branch and—when I'm ready—I release the other and push against the tree with both feet.

The pomegranate holds on for a moment and then—*snap!*

Ruby fruit clutched in my hands, I free-fall for the floor.

"Ooof!"

I fall straight into Xander's waiting arms. He manages to keep us both upright, too. I'm impressed.

"Thanks," I say as he sets me on my feet. "Let's get out of here."

"You're nuts," he says.

"I know."

Xander and I race out through the alcove, past the blind guard, who steps back into position, and across the ballroom. If only we could *autoport* back to Serfopoula. But the supernatural protections in Hades make Mount Olympus look like a preschool. No one wants the dead getting back to the world of the living.

We have to return the way we came.

We hurry back through the hallways, reversing our course for the side exit.

The palace was so still, so empty on our way in, it never crossed my mind that we might run into someone on the way out. But as we race out of a side corridor, back into the entrance hall, I crash full-body into someone.

“Grnph,” I groan at the collision.

A woman screams as she falls backward onto the tile floor.

I stumble, but manage to stay upright.

As Xander skids to a stop next to me, I reach down—instinctively offering to help the woman up.

“I’m sorry,” I say as her palm connects with mine and she looks up at me, “I wasn’t—”

My words freeze as I realize the woman on the floor—the woman I slammed to the ground in my haste to get the heck out of this place—is none other than Persephone herself.

“No harm,” Persephone replies, pulling herself to her feet using my now-limp arm. “I am uninjured.”

She smiles at me, a grin that embodies all the youth and rebirth and nature we just saw in the Hall of Springtime. Her blond hair, the same golden shade as mine, falls perfectly over her shoulders and her gauzy, light-green gown. She is the embodiment of perfection. No wonder Hades kidnapped her.

“Hi,” I say lamely, with a lame wave thrown in for general all-around lameness.

“Hello,” she replies with a vague smile.

Then, as if I weren’t standing right in front of her, she sidesteps me and continues on her way. She heads for the back room—for the ballroom and the gem-encrusted hall beyond, I’m guessing—and I turn in a half circle to watch her walk away. Without another word.

“That was close,” Xander says, shaking his head as Persephone disappears from view. “You’re lucky she didn’t—”

“Stupid cow,” I mutter.

“Whoa.” Xander lifts his hands in a defensive gesture. “That’s a little harsh.”

“She didn’t even recognize me.”

Xander scowls. “Should she have?”

“You would think,” I say, jamming my hands through my hair. “An ancestor god is supposed to recognize their descendants.”

Yes, weak-willed, harebrained, damsel-in-distress Persephone is my godly ancestor. Makes a girl proud. It’s not hard to guess why I’ve kept that juicy embarrassment a secret all these years.

I barely register the shock on Xander’s face before I turn and race away, ready to get as far from the underworld as possible.

9

Xander and I *autoport* back to the stadium and are immediately surrounded by our friends.

"Are you okay?" Phoebe asks.

I nod and she smiles.

Stella looks relieved as she launches herself at Xander.

While the pair attempts to make kissing an Olympic sport, Troy steps in front of me and pulls me into a crushing hug. I don't know if it's the odd sensation of his strong arms around me or the change to blue-sky Serfopoula from the darkness of the underworld or just the gravity of everything I've done—of what I'm about to do—but for a second I can't breathe. I lift my arms and hug him back. My emotions crash down around me and I lean into him, grateful for his strength.

He has always been there for me, supporting me in whatever crazy thing I'm doing. I don't think I ever realized how much I need him—and how much I take his presence in my life for granted.

It feels nice to be in his arms.

And Troy isn't the only thing I've taken for granted. This world around me—with friends and trees and air that smells like the sea and sweaty teen athletes—is amazing. After trips to three other realms—every one but Abyssos—I'm prepared never to leave this one again.

Except that I have to.

Releasing Troy from my grip, I step back and ask, "Did you bring them?"

He drops his arms slowly, like he's not sure what to do if he's not hugging me anymore, and shoves his hands into his pockets. "You're going now?"

"Troy," I warn. "I told you to bring them."

"I did." He pulls his hands out of his pockets and holds out his palms, revealing the golden feather and the silver seashell. "Are you sure you don't

want to take a few days to think about—”

“No,” I interrupt as I snatch the objects from his hands. “I’m not wasting any more time.”

I am so not in the mood for a think-about-what-you’re-doing lecture. He has no idea what it’s like to live with this kind of guilt for so long. I can’t remember a time when I didn’t hate myself for what my younger self did.

It’s time to make things right and get that burden off my shoulders.

It’s time to call Chronos.

“We need to talk about this,” Griffin says.

I frown at him as he steps closer. “What’s to talk about?”

“I should be the one to go back in time.” His golden eyes burn beneath his dark, scowling brow. “I’m the one who fed ambrosia to the baby. I’m the one who should fix things.”

“No.”

I place the ruby seeds in my palm alongside the feather and the seashell.

“No?” Griffin jerks back. “Just like that—no—and we don’t get to talk about it?”

“No,” I repeat. “We don’t get to talk about it.”

“Nic—”

“Do you know what the next step is?” I ask, getting bored with this argument. I know he wants to be the one to save his parents. I know how he feels—better than anyone—but I also know why it’s not possible. “After calling Chronos, do you know what you’d have to do next?”

His eyes darken. “No, I—”

“You have to call your ancestor,” I explain. “You have to call your god and ask them for a golden coin.”

Griffin jerks back. Clearly he sees my point. His whole body softens a little and he leans back, away from me. Away from the argument.

Phoebe, on the other hand, doesn’t get it.

“What?” she asks, coming to Griffin’s side. “What’s wrong with that? Griffin can call Hercules and—”

“No,” Griffin says, his voice low and hard. “I can’t.”

“Hercules is a demigod,” Troy explains. “He doesn’t qualify.”

“So. Then he can call . . .” Phoebe begins, but trails off before she can argue. “Oh.”

“Yeah,” I say. “Oh.”

On the best days, inviting the god of war over for a visit is a dangerous proposition. Ares is too volatile, too unpredictable, too . . . likely to wind up inciting a battle or two while he's here.

On a day when we're looking to break one of the unbreakable rules, messing with the space-time continuum and changing everything that's happened in the last ten years, the god of war is the last person we want to ask for help.

"I'm going," I say, fingering the objects in my hand. "Because Persephone is the safer bet."

Phoebe makes a sound that is halfway between laughing and choking.

"Persephone?" she gasps. "*She's* your top secret ancestor?"

It's not like I don't get why she thinks this is hilarious. The descendants of the underworld queen are known for being insipid, idiotic, and totally spineless. I pride myself on being original, street-smart, and borderline mutinous. We're not exactly cut from the same mold.

Which is why I distance myself from the clan and keep my ancestry as secret as possible. Until now, only Troy and Griffin—and now Xander—knew the truth.

I cut her a hard glare, but she can't stop laughing. Only Phoebe could get away with that—anyone else and I'd turn their tongue into snakes.

"I'm sorry," Phoebe says, clearly not actually apologizing, "but that's just . . ." She finally looks at me and must see the steam shooting from my ears. "Not who I expected," she finishes quietly.

"No one ever does," I reply.

As Phoebe bites her lips to keep from laughing, I hold out the objects in my palm. I open my mouth, ready to call the god of time and get this time-travel ball rolling, but Stella *autoports* to my side and slaps her hand over my mouth before I can say a word.

"Not here," she admonishes.

I shove her away, wiping the feel of her hand off my lips.

Ignoring my glare—does no one respect my anger anymore?—she says, "If you're going to call an ancient one, you need to be in the pantheon temple."

"She's right," Troy says, exchanging a grateful look with the queen *B.*

"Fine," I say, shoving the objects into my pocket as I *autoport* to the temple.

Shutting the temple doors behind me, I leave my friends standing on the steps outside and I tighten my grip on the three objects in my fist. I have worked so hard to get them, and now it's time to put them to use.

This is, without a doubt, the scariest—and possibly the dumbest—thing I have ever done.

What I'm about to do makes all my past infractions look like little rebellions. Not that I thought Headmaster Petrolas would dismiss the incident with the baby oil in the boys' bathroom very lightly. But time travel? That's a whole other level of trouble.

"Stop stalling," I whisper to myself.

When have I ever been afraid of trouble? Even when it comes in the form of a primordial deity? With every last drop of courage I possess, I close my eyes and shout, "Chronos. God of time, I call you to my presence."

I open my eyes, expecting to see him standing before me.

Nothing. Empty space.

"You cannot be serious," I grumble. "Stupid, selfish, *obstinate* gods. Chronos!" I shout again. "I call you, Chronos. I need you."

"No need to yell, child of gods," a deep, rumbling voice says. "I am here."

I spin around.

Standing ten feet away, just inside the temple doors, is the god of time. When I first look, he appears to be a gray-bearded old man who resembles the god-kings. Then, right before my eyes, his image wavers into that of a three-headed serpent. One head is that of a young man, one is a lion, and the third is a bull.

As I stare, the image continues to flicker back and forth between the two.

I squeeze my eyes shut, trying to make the images settle on just one appearance, but when I look again it's still the flickering cycle.

Guess I'll have to deal with it.

Focusing my gaze on his eyes—first those of the old man, then the human head on the serpent—I hold out my hand.

"I want to travel back in time," I say, weaker than intended.

The image freezes on the old man for a minute as he laughs, the rough sound echoing off the stone walls of the temple. "It has been too long since

any *hematheos* sought the power of *chronoportation.”*

I shift my weight to my other foot. “It’s not strictly legal.”

“No,” he says, the image going back to the flickering cycle, “it is not.”

The primordials and the Olympians have never been the best of friends. They have disagreed about how to run the world since, oh, before the world was around. Unfortunately for the primordials, the Olympians are currently in charge. Which means their rules *rule.* They say no time travel, so no time travel.

Hardly seems fair to the god of time.

“But it is possible,” I argue, shoving my hand out farther. “And I brought the offering.”

“Yes,” he says, slithering forward as the image locks on the serpent. The lion’s head leans close over my palm, inspecting the objects held there.

In a flash, the image of the old man snatches the objects from my palm, shoves them into his mouth, and swallows them.

I feel my eyes widen as the image flickers twice more and then settles on a new one—the young man from the three-headed serpent, but with a man’s body to match. He smiles, his sky-blue eyes sparkling with energy.

“Thank you,” he says, rolling his shoulders like he’s been sitting in a cramped airplane seat for twelve hours. “I needed that.”

This third image, the young man with a gleaming smile, curly blond hair, and a body to rival Adonis himself, is a surprise. I always pictured the god of time more like the first image—a frail old man, stooped with age. Who’d have thought Chronos could be such a hottie?

“Few see my true image,” he explains. “Many choose to view time as an hourglass, with youth and vitality draining away as the sands fall.” He gestures at his body. “But time and age are merely constructs of perception.”

“Um, okay . . .”

This guy sounds like he’s lost his marbles.

But the sharp glare he throws my way is completely clear.

“Forgive me,” he says, stepping close. “I have been alone too long. You summoned me for a reason.”

“Yes,” I say, trying not to stammer. “I need to travel back in time.”

His blue eyes narrow. “Need to?”

“I—” Darn it. “I want to.”

It’s a struggle to hold my emotions in check as memories invade. Memories of Mom and Dad. Griffin’s parents. The happy times on Mount Olympus. The nights I cried myself to sleep in my dorm room. It all swirls around in my mind.

Chronos studies me. I hope he can’t read my thoughts, because they’re a total mess. I try to get them under control, to keep my reasons for wanting to time travel a secret.

“For what purpose?” he asks.

“To observe.” I have to give him a believable answer that is *not* the truth. “It’s research.”

He steps so close I can smell the mothball scent that surrounds him. “Do you intend to alter the past?”

“No,” I lie without hesitation.

Traveling back in time, breaking one of the unbreakable rules, is bad enough. According to the book, even though changing something in the past doesn’t mess with the present, even Chronos disapproves of messing with godly decree. If he thinks I’m going back to circumvent an Olympic punishment, then he will deny my request.

I hold my breath and focus my thoughts as he scrutinizes me.

Finally, after what feels like an eternity but is probably more like ten seconds, he snaps his fingers. A shiny gold coin appears in his hand.

“This,” he says, holding the coin in front of my eyes, “is your key back to the present. It will return you to your time of departure.”

He grabs my wrist and carefully places the coin in the center of my palm. It’s heads up and I instantly recognize the face as that of Chronos as an old man.

As he closes my fingers around the cool metal disc, he says, “The other coin, your key to the past, must be given by your godly ancestor.”

Yay. Quality time with the bimbo queen.

“Know this,” he says. “With the other coin you can choose only the date. You will arrive at whatever hour of day you leave this point in time, and so you must wait until the hour you wish to visit before initiating your journey.”

I squeeze my hand into a fist, my heart racing.

“When your ancestor grants the coin,” he whispers, leaning forward to speak next to my ear, “picture the date in your mind and you will be

transported.”

I can’t move. I’m stunned frozen by the realization that I’m *this* close. That I have in my hand the ability to fix everything. I’m only one chat with Persephone away from making things right.

As Chronos steps back to a normal distance, I stare straight ahead.

“Good luck,” he says with a cryptic twist to his lips, “and timespeed.”

I nod, unable to speak.

Then, in a soft flash of blue light, Chronos is gone and I am alone in the temple, alone with my thoughts, with the chance to undo the past literally within my grasp.

10

When I walk out of the temple, everyone starts talking at once.

"Did it work?"

"What did he look like?"

"Did you get the coin?"

"What happened?"

"Are you okay?"

The last question is from Troy. I give him disapproving look—of course I'm okay—and then pull the coin from my pocket. I hold it up, the golden metal shining in the setting sun.

"I got it," I say, and everyone falls quiet.

This quest just got more real than anyone ever imagined. With this little piece of gold—okay, not so little: it has to weigh at least a few ounces—the idea of time travel has gone from a distant dream to near reality.

Trust me, I feel the weight of it settle on my shoulders.

"Now what?" Phoebe finally asks.

"Now," I say with a shrug, "I wait. Chronos said I have to call Persephone at the same time of day I want to go back to."

Griffin rolls one shoulder. "I don't remember the exact time," he says. "Just that it was early afternoon."

"I do." I've read the official transcripts enough times that I have the entire thing memorized. All three hundred and forty-eight pages. "Two seventeen."

"It's almost seven now," Stella offers.

I nod. "I have to wait until tomorrow."

We stand in a nervous circle, silent on the steps of the pantheon temple. My mind races. When it gets to be too much, I break the silence.

"No point hanging out here," I say. "There's nothing to do until tomorrow."

“Yeah, we have an early run,” Phoebe says, wrapping her hand around Griffin’s arm.

“I have a reading list a mile long,” Stella says. “Oxford has high expectations for incoming students.”

“So we’ll meet back here tomorrow at . . . ?” Phoebe asks. “Two?”

I shake my head. “Quarter ’til. I want to be sure to have enough time.”

Everyone agrees to reassemble tomorrow and then disperses, leaving me and Troy standing on the steps. He moves to face me on the next step down.

He repeats his earlier question. “Are you okay?”

“Stop asking me that,” I answer immediately. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

He tilts his head down and looks up at me from under a scowl. “Seriously?”

“Seriously,” I say, ignoring his chiding look. “I’m fine.”

He watches me, like he’s deciding whether to argue with me or not. In the end, he asks, “Want to grab something to eat? I hear the dining hall has lasagna today.”

But I’m already shaking my head before he finishes. “I have a couple errands to run.”

“I could go with you,” he offers.

“Shouldn’t you be hanging out with your girlfriend?” I ask, though even the *thought* of Troy with Adara makes me nauseous.

“For the last time,” he says, practically growling, “I do *not* have a girlfriend. Adara and I are *not* dating. Let it go already.”

“No,” I say. “If you’re not dating, then what are you doing? Because it certainly isn’t *nothing.*”

“You really want to know?” he asks.

I stare him down. “I really want to know.”

His cheeks flame up like he’s standing too close to a bonfire.

“I’m helping her,” he says. He ducks his head. “I’m helping the squad.”

“The squad?” I echo. “The *cheerleading* squad?”

He rubs his hands over his short hair. “I’m writing them a song, okay?”

“You’re writing a—?” I slap my hand over my mouth to keep from laughing out loud. “Troy Travatas,” I say, struggling to keep a serious look on my face. “Are you writing a *cheer?*”

My laughter dies as he looks up at me, those gentle hazel eyes so full of embarrassment. That look cuts right through my humor. I don't want to be responsible for making him feel bad. About anything.

"That's pretty cool." I soft-punch him in the shoulder. "Your first professional gig."

He gives me a half smile. "I'm not getting paid or anything."

"You don't have to wear a uniform, do you?"

"No," he says with a laugh.

I scan down to his feet. "Too bad. Your legs would look great in one of those pleated skirts."

He rolls his eyes and shakes his head and I know I have my Troy back.

"Ha-ha," he says, "very funny. Now if you're done teasing me, we can grab dinner—"

"No," I say, cutting him off as I force myself to refocus on the quest at hand. "I need some time alone."

The thing about Adara provided some much-needed comic relief, but the big picture still looms. I have a huge day tomorrow. The stress and pressure are almost overwhelming.

Troy winces just enough to show that I hurt him. I know he's sensitive and I know I'm pushing him away. But I can't feel bad about that right now. There isn't room in my brain.

"I'll see you later," I say, brushing past him as I walk down the steps.

I don't turn back to see how long he stands there.

As I head away from the temple, I force thoughts of Troy out of my mind. I have enough to think about. I'm about to go back in time to stop my younger self from feeding ambrosia to Hera's baby son. There is a whole world of pressure in that single act.

Just traveling through time is a crazy feat. As far as I know, no one has done it in centuries. Maybe even millennia.

There are reasons time travel is illegal. Altering the course of time is tricky. What if I do it wrong? What if I can't stop myself or I make the situation worse? Having my parents banished and Griffin's smoted was bad enough. What if I screw up and the punishments are worse?

I walk through the village, blindly wandering wherever my feet take me.

The what-ifs racing through my mind are overwhelming. I don't usually waste time thinking about consequences. I'm more of an act-now, worry-

about-detention-later girl.

But this? This is too big. Too important.

I'm not sure how long I walk. When I finally find myself standing in front of the boys' dorm, it's pitch dark and I'm shivering in the night air.

I enter the building, climb the stairs, and stop in front of Troy's door.

He opens it before my third knock.

"I'm not okay," I blurt. "I'm scared."

I can honestly say that those are words I've never said to anyone before in my life. I don't get scared. And on the rare occasion that I might, I push the pointless sensation aside. Fear is a waste—it doesn't accomplish anything.

But today, no matter how hard I shove, the fear stays lodged in my heart.

I stand there, watching Troy, waiting for him to respond. Waiting for him to laugh or say something sarcastic like, *Never thought I'd see the day.*

But he doesn't.

He steps forward, wraps his arms around me, and squeezes tight.

"It'll be okay," he whispers against my hair. "Everything will be fine."

As I relax into his hug, I want to believe him. More than anything in the world, I want to believe things will work out.

I'm just not used to fearing that they won't.

"Don't jinx her," Phoebe says. "She hasn't done it yet."

"There is no such thing as a jinx," Stella replies.

"Just curses," Xander says.

Griffin adds, "And luck."

"It doesn't have to be real," Phoebe argues, "to mess things up."

Troy hushes them.

I don't turn to look at my friends. My mind is focused on the temple door above me and what is waiting for me inside. I spent the entire night wide-awake, sitting on Troy's bed, thinking about this moment. Dreading it—but also anxious for the time to get here already.

"Stella's right," I say, not looking away from the door. "I don't believe in jinxes."

But I do believe in action.

Without another word, I put one boot in front of the other and march up the steps. This shouldn't be so hard. I faced down one of the old gods yesterday. How much worse could Persephone be?

At the door I hesitate for only a second—I don't allow myself any longer—and then push my way inside.

Sliding the door shut behind me, I scan the temple interior. The mosaic murals covering the walls on all sides depict major events in mythology. The battle between the Titans and the Olympians. The Trojan War. Hades kidnapping Persephone. Clearly, all the high points.

I walk over to the one depicting my ancient ancestor getting carried away into the underworld, hanging over Hades's back like a sack of stupid potatoes. How is it possible the dimwit and I share blood?

"Stop stalling," I finally mutter, forcing myself to turn away from the mural.

Time to get this over with.

I walk to the center of the temple, close my eyes, and shout, "Persephone!"

I shake my head as I open my eyes, bracing myself for my first conversation with my ancestor goddess. Nothing happens—no bright light or puff of smoke. The temple remains as empty as when I walked in.

"Persephone!" I shout again. "Here, dummy, dummy, dummy."

Nope.

I try a dozen more times, a dozen different ways.

Nothing.

Oh my gods, I have the dumbest ancestor in the history of all mythology. She doesn't even come when one of her own calls for her.

I keep shouting her name as I make a tour of the temple, yelling for her at every corner and column.

"Listen, you dumb cow," I shout, reaching the end of my admittedly short rope, "I need your help. Trust me, if I could do this any other way I would. Aaarrgh!"

Did I really expect anything more from the idiot queen of the underworld?

I stop in front of her mosaic—the depiction of what should be her greatest shame—and just stare. Other than our blond hair, I have nothing—*nothing!*—in common with her. I would never let myself get kidnapped. If I

did, I would never agree to stay with my kidnapper. And I would never, ever, no matter what, abandon my friends or family when they need me.

With a primal scream, I slam a combat boot into her mural.

“Come on,” I scream one last time. “Don’t you want to get away from the underworld for a few minutes?”

“Why would I?” a lyrical female voice says from behind me. “It is, after all, my home.”

I spin around—stunned, relieved, and furious to find Persephone standing at the center of the temple. She is a vision in a flowing golden gown, her hair piled up in a mess of yellow curls.

“I—uh—”

My mind goes blank for a moment. I’m stunned silent.

Persephone closes the space between us, moving so smoothly that it looks like she’s floating. Who knows? Maybe she is.

“Why did you call me to the temple?” she asks, a confused but kind look on her face. “What can I do for you, child?”

What can she do for me? She’s talking to me like I’m a total stranger, not one of her unlucky descendants. For the love of Zeus, she’s dumb.

My anger returns tenfold.

“I need a golden coin,” I snap. “I have to go back in time.”

She tilts her head slightly, making her look like a curious poodle. “*Chronoportation* is illegal.”

“I know,” I say with tense growl. “I still need the coin.”

She shakes her head and smiles. “But why would you call me?” she asks. “You must request the coin of Chronos from your ancestor god.”

“That *is* why I called you.”

Seriously. If this conversation goes on any longer without her handing over the coin, I’m going to strangle her.

“But why?” she repeats. “I am not your ancestor.”

“You’re not—” I shake my head. “Of course you are.”

“I’m afraid not.” She gives me an amused look. “Do you not think I would recognize my own children?”

“No, actually I—”

Before I can finish telling her exactly how dumb I think she is, the goddess of Spring smiles and vanishes in a puff of shimmering smoke. Just like that, she’s gone and I’m alone in the temple.

I’m so stunned by her disappearance that my mind freezes, stuck on her words. Replaying them over and over. *I am not your ancestor. I am not your ancestor. I am not your—*

It can’t be true. Can it?

“Holy Hades.”

Is it possible that she really isn’t my ancestor? That I’m actually not a descendant of Persephone?

On any other day that news would leave me elated. Thrilled. Over the freaking moon to find out I’m not related to the most embarrassing goddess on the family tree.

But today? I’m pissed. I don’t have time to celebrate. I need to find out who my ancestor is so I can get that second gold coin.

And I know only one person who might know the answer.

The moment I open the temple doors, I’m bombarded with questions again. Everyone rushes me, assuming I’ve gone back in time and changed things, and eager to hear all the exciting details.

They have no idea.

“What happened?”

“Did you get the coin?”

“What was she like?”

“Did you go back already?”

“Did you fix things?”

Only Troy seems to notice that I’m fuming and stomping down the steps at an angry pace. I brush past them, intent on my destination.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, grabbing my elbow before I can escape.

What’s wrong? What *isn’t* wrong?

I try to pull away, to blow them all off because the emotions bouncing around inside me are too volatile, too close to the surface. Even the tiniest crack will send them all pouring out of me.

But Troy won’t let me off so easily. He moves around to face me. “What happened?”

“Nothing.”

“Nicole,” he says, his jaw set.

As if sensing my raging emotions, the rest of my friends stay silent. I think Stella backs up a few steps. But Troy . . . he holds my gaze steady,

unblinking, and silently demanding I tell him what's going on. Finally, I can't hold it in any longer.

"I'm adopted," I blurt.

"You're what?" he asks.

Everyone else gasps.

"I think I'm adopted," I repeat, letting the realization fully sink in as I say the words. "Persephone said she isn't my godly ancestor."

Which can only mean I'm adopted. My dad is Persephone's son—the gods know I've done enough Spring Welcoming rituals in my lifetime to prove that fact. Mom is from a family of minor forest spirits, but she pledged herself as a Servant of Spring when she and Dad got married.

Persephone is the HGIC—head goddess in charge—in our household.

Which means that if Persephone isn't my *goddess*, then my parents aren't my *parents*. I'm adopted.

It makes so much sense. My mom has almost-black hair and Dad's is a dark chocolate brown. Sure, my hair was darker before the bleach obliterated the color, but not *that* dark. We have different eyes, different noses, and I'm four inches shorter than Mom and six inches shorter than Dad. I don't know why I never considered the possibility before.

And I thought Persephone was the dumb one.

"Then who is your god?" Stella asks, apparently deciding that I'm past the dangerous stage.

"I—" I shake my head, trying to make sense of this new reality. "I don't know. But I know who to ask."

"Who?" Griffin asks.

I exchange a look with Stella that she doesn't need *psychospection* to read.

"My dad," she says and, continuing her streak of being surprisingly willing to help, she adds, "He's working in his office today."

"Thanks," I tell her. Then, to everyone, I say, "I need to do this alone."

I look everyone in the eye, making sure they understand I'm serious. Everyone but Troy nods. He just stares back at me, keeping his reaction hidden.

"Call me if you need anything," Phoebe says, stepping forward to give me a big hug.

"Thanks," I say, hugging her back. "But I'm good."

When everyone else is gone, Troy says, “I’ll walk you to the school.”

“Troy, I don’t need—”

“I know you don’t,” he answers before I can finish. “But you’re going to let me anyway. You can’t do everything alone, Nicole. You don’t have to.”

I never realized he was so stubborn. Must be one of the reasons I like him so much.

We don’t say another word—there’s no need. He falls in step beside me as we head to the school. And I have to resist the odd impulse to reach out and take his hand.

“Good afternoon, Miss Matios,” Headmaster Petrolas says when I barge into his office. “What can I—”

“Who?” I demand.

To his credit, he doesn’t flinch. “I beg your pardon?”

I’ve been in the headmaster’s office enough that the place feels like a second home. The headmaster and I have stared each other down across his wide desk more times than I can count. I know how to read him.

He may act innocent, but his eyes narrow the tiniest bit and he straightens in his chair. He is notorious for knowing things he shouldn’t, so I have a feeling he knows exactly what I’m asking. But if he wants to play this game, I’ll spell it out.

“I’m adopted,” I say, as if those words haven’t turned my world upside down. “Who is my real ancestor god?”

He rests his elbows oh-so-casually on his desk. “How did you come by this information?”

“Is that really the important detail here?” I reply.

He lifts one eyebrow.

Fine.

“I called Persephone to the temple.” I drop into my chair—no, really, I carved my name into one of the legs—as if this whole thing is no big deal. “She told me I wasn’t one of hers.”

“And *why* were you calling Persephone?” he asks, like a he’s sniffing out the trail to my rule breaking.

He has no idea.

“That’s between me and my ancestor god,” I say, playing it cool. “Some things are private between a girl and her goddess.”

He studies me for a long time. If I weren’t used to his scrutiny and his uncanny ability to uncover trouble, I might crack. But I’ve been in this chair too many times. I know how to keep my game face on.

Finally, he sighs and nods.

“We knew this day would come.” He reaches over and opens one of his desk drawers. He hands me a crisp white envelope. “This will explain the situation.”

I look from him to the envelope and back again. When I finally take it, he gives me a look I can’t quite interpret. Sympathy? Sadness?

Whatever. I don’t want either.

I tear open the envelope and pull out the letter inside.

Dearest darling Nicole,

We always wanted to find a way to tell you the truth ourselves. But sometimes telling the truth is harder than living a lie, and we couldn’t stand the thought of seeing betrayal in your eyes. Headmaster Petrolas suggested we write this letter so that, when the time came for you to learn the details of your birth, your father and I would have a chance to explain things. Above all else, know that we love you and that you are our daughter in every possible way. We consider you our own, even though the bonds we share are not of blood. When you came into our lives, you filled a hole that we thought forever empty. We hope you can forgive us for the deception, but we thought it for the best that you did not know the truth until it was unavoidably necessary.

Yours with a full heart,
Mom and Dad

I slide the first sheet behind the second, and find myself reading what appears to be my birth certificate. All the familiar details remain the same—my birthday, my weight and length at birth, even my name, Nicole Marie. The difference, though, is on the lines where the doctor—clearly a *hematheos* doctor—filled in the names of the parents.

The father line is blank.

The mother line reads one word: *Moirae.*
The Fates.

11

"What did he—" Troy stands as I brush past him. "Nicole?"

My vision narrows to a small, foggy circle. I turn and head down the hall, heading . . . I don't know where. Just out of here. Out of this building, out of this place that turned my world completely on its end.

As if finding out I'm adopted wasn't bad enough.

"Nicole!" Troy shouts, jogging to catch up with me. "Hey."

He dashes in front of me, spins around, and grabs my upper arms.

Whatever he sees on my face stuns him silent.

"What?" he asks. "What did Headmaster Petrolas tell you?"

I open my mouth, intent on telling him—intent on saying the words—but nothing comes out. My breath is gone; my brain is gone.

Without another word, Troy releases his grip on my arms and surrounds me in a big, tight hug. He pulls me close and I sink into him. I've never needed comfort more.

How do I wrap my mind around this? Daughter of the Fates—literal, direct daughter—what kind of cruel joke is that? Petrolas tried to explain it to me, tried to fill in the blanks left in the vague letter from my parents. Parents who aren't really my parents.

Who are they, then?

He said the Moirae—the Fates—wanted a child of the world, a daughter more human than myth. And so they . . . *created me. I'm a creation.*

My breath catches and I make a kind of choking sound. That's when I feel it—the moisture on my cheeks.

"Shhh," Troy soothes. "It's okay. It'll be okay."

He has no idea.

I shake my head.

"It won't be."

I lean back, trying to pull myself out of the hug. Troy won't let me go.

"Nothing will ever be okay again," I say.

He tilts his head down, bringing his forehead so close to mine I can almost feel it. “Tell me.”

“I’m—”

I close my eyes, not able to say the words while looking in his eyes. I can’t stand the thought of seeing his pity or disgust.

It’s a struggle to even say the words.

“I am the daughter of . . . the Fates.”

To his credit, he doesn’t gasp or choke or any other completely reasonable reaction to that piece of news. I open my eyes and find him looking at me with a mix of awe and confusion.

Not exactly what I expected.

“Did you hear me?” I ask. “I’m the daughter—”

“Of the Fates,” he finishes. “Yeah, I heard. That’s . . .”

“Horrible?” I suggest, finally twisting myself out of his hug. “Freaky. Weird. Terrifying.”

“Cool,” he says with a half smile.

I scowl. “It’s not cool.”

He shrugs, as if totally confused by my reaction. “It’s still new. In time you’ll—”

“I’ll what?” I snap. “I’ll come to love them? To embrace my heritage? To get *I Heart Fate* tattooed across my chest?”

“Well, not quite that.”

“Troy, they *made* me,” I explain. “I’m not a normal girl.”

“I think we’ve always known that. I love you anyway.” His cheeks flame, and he starts stammering, “I mean *we* love you. Your friends. We all love you, even though you’re not normal.”

I punch him in the arm. “I have no father. Just three mothers who are in charge of the birth, life, and death of every person on the planet.”

“You really think that’s any weirder than me being the descendant of the god of medicine?” he asks. “Or Phoebe being Nike’s great-granddaughter?”

“Of course it is.”

“It’s not,” he says with a shrug. “Besides, at least you’re not really a descendant of Persephone.”

“No, but I’m—” I stop midsentence as his words sink in. “I’m not, am I?”

I can’t help the smile. Or the laugh that follows.

“You’re right,” I say between laughs. “I’m not! I’m really not.”

The idiot goddess isn’t my ancestor. Anything has to be better than that, right?

We erupt in a fit of laughter for several seconds. I think it’s more of a release than actual humor. I’ve had a lot to process in a short time—I can travel back in time and fix things, I’m adopted, my real parents are the Fates. Is it any wonder my brain needs to take a little vacation for a minute?

But as the laughter dies, my thoughts circle back to the reason I found out the truth, the reason I’m seeking out my ancestor god—gods—in the first place. The humor fades and the anger remains.

“What time is it?” I demand.

Troy checks his watch. “Just after two.”

“I still have time.” I start walking for the front door.

Troy hurries to catch up. “Are you sure? Don’t you want to take a day to process or something?”

“I’ve been waiting ten years,” I say, though the truth is I’ve apparently been waiting my whole life to meet my real parents; I just didn’t know it. “I’m not going to waste another day.”

When I enter the temple this time, I let my anger seep through every pore of my body. I want these witches to know what they’re getting into when they show up. I channel the anger—over so many things—as I call for them.

“Moraie!” I shout at the empty temple. “I call on you, Fates. I demand your appearance!”

I spin in circles waiting for them to pop in, sneaking up on me like Chronos and Persephone did.

“Fates!” I scream at the top of my lungs. “You are my ancestors. You have to come.”

A thought tickles at the back of my mind, like a memory of something I never knew. Something that tells me what I need to say to call them here.

I clench my jaw, snort out a sharp breath, and say, “I call on you . . . Mothers.”

In a flash, three women stand before me. They are varying ages—one is young and beautiful, not more than a few years older than me, another is middle-aged, and the third is so ancient she is gnarled and hunched like a

hideous gargoyle. They have no eyes except for the one cupped in the palm of the ancient one.

She holds out her hand, surveying me with the creepy eyeball.

“I want to see,” the young one says, reaching for the eye.

The ancient one holds it out of her reach. “She is pretty,” she says. She holds the eye up near the side of my head. “But her hair is odd.”

I fight the urge to knock her hand away.

“My hair is fine,” I growl.

Short, spiky blond might not have been normal back in the ancient day, but it’s acceptable now. Even if it’s not, I don’t care.

The young one steps closer and grabs the eyeball, studying me just like the old one did.

“Oooh, she has my nose,” the young one says. She lifts her empty hand to her own nose. “At least, I think she does.”

All the while, the middle-aged one stands silent, almost like she’s watching me with empty eyes. Her lips spread into a faint smile. She looks the most like a mother, the most like my own mother—or at least the mom I’ve always believed was my mother.

The middle-aged one doesn’t say a word, just stands there smiling, like she’s taking it all in.

“I called you for a reason, Mothers,” I say, choking over the last word. “I need to travel back in time.”

“Impossible,” the ancient one says.

The young one quips, “That’s illegal.”

Only the middle-aged one asks, “Why?”

I focus on her, since she seems like the reasonable one.

“I think you know why,” I say.

She shakes her head. “You cannot change the past.”

I am so tired of people telling me that. What’s the point of *chronoportation* if not to change the past? Illegal or not, it’s a power for a reason.

My barely controlled anger explodes. “It isn’t fair!” I shout. “What happened to my parents—biological or not, they’re the only parents I have ever known—isn’t fair. They don’t deserve their punishment and neither do Griffin’s parents.”

“The judgment of Olympus . . .” the old one begins.

“Is fallible,” I bark. “They make mistakes. And that was a *mistake.*”

“There are procedures,” the young one offers. “You can appeal the decision.”

“I have.” I really want to punch something. “They turned me down.”

As if the gods want to admit they made a mistake. As if Hera will let them rescind the order that banished my parents and smoted Griffin’s. If the gods are good at anything, they have mad grudge skills. Hera better than most. She’ll never let it go.

When the Fates look like they want to keep arguing, I pull out the secret weapon.

“You owe me,” I say, my voice weaker than I would like. “You owe my parents. They have raised me, taken care of me, *loved* me. You abandoned me, and they took me in.”

“We did not—” The youngest starts to say something, but the middle-aged one stops her.

“You are right,” she says. “We owe you a great deal.” To her sisters, she says, “Let us conference.”

I stand there, feeling awkward and scared while they debate my request. Fervent whispers and hushed argument fill the temple. Finally, after what feels like forever, they turn back to face me.

“We are agreed,” the middle-aged one says.

The young one says, “We will give you the coin.”

“You may go back,” the old one says, pulling a piece of gold out of thin air. This one is stamped with the image of Chronos’s youthful face. “To see the right of things.”

Finally.

Without hesitation, I reach forward and take the coin.

12

Before my fingers even touch the metal, there is a bright flash and I'm standing in a familiar hallway. I'm on Mount Olympus and it feels different than when I was here a few days ago. It feels . . . old.

I glance up at the big gilded clock that hangs above the mosaic at the far end of the hall. It's a few minutes after two. Just a short time before the moment that changed everything.

Is it possible? Am I really here, ten years ago? Can I really prevent myself from screwing up so many lives?

Until this instant I never stopped to think about how I would do it, how I would stop things. I just thought I'd . . . you know, stop them. But can I walk up to my seven-year-old self and say, "Hey, this is a bad idea. Quit it"?

Will it break my brain?

A door at the other end of the hall swings open, and suddenly I don't have time for strategy. I spin around just as little Nicole and Griffin slip out of the storage closet—a bottle of ambrosia clutched in my tiny hands, a golden cup in his—and scurry down the hall. Giggling and laughing at the prospect of the fun they're about to have.

I'm frozen, watching the last moments of innocent joy I ever remember feeling. After this, everything changed. Life could never be fun again. I got a harsh reality lesson at a very young age. I'm witnessing—rewitnessing—the most important moment in my life.

It's a little overwhelming.

Instinct takes over and I press my back up against the cool marble wall, trying to make myself invisible as they pass by.

It works. They don't notice me, and soon they're rounding the corner and making fast for the nursery.

"Crap." I ball my hands into fists. "I came here to stop us. Not to cower and hide."

Pushing away from my hiding spot, I race after them—me—us. I follow the hallway, winding around corner after corner. Over the clomping sound of my combat boots on the marble floor, I can hear their—my—our—laughter, always a turn ahead of me.

Finally, I come around the last bend, skidding to a stop in the hallway that leads to the nursery. Little Nicole and Griffin are standing outside the door, arguing over who is going to get to feed the ambrosia to Hera's son.

I'd forgotten that part.

Memory resurfaces as I watch my younger self make a pouty face at Griffin as he snatches the bottle from her hand. With a smirk, he turns and reaches for the door handle.

"No!" I shout, sprinting the distance to the nursery door.

They don't react.

Even as I'm racing full-out, I can sense that something is wrong. There is something . . . unreal about what I'm experiencing. I get to the door right as it closes behind young Nicole and Griffin.

"There's still time," I gasp, reaching for the closing door. "I can still—"

My fingers glide right through the golden handle.

"What the—?"

I try to grab the handle, the door itself, anything, but my hand moves through the surfaces as if they're nothing more than illusion.

In a last-ditch effort, I step fully through the door, no longer shocked to find myself standing the nursery just as Griffin is about to deliver the immortality-killing dose.

"NO!" I scream.

Tears streak down my cheeks as I watch my young self cheer Griffin on as he feeds the drops of golden liquid to the baby.

Footsteps echo in the hall outside the nursery.

I know what's coming—*who's* coming. Hera and her entourage are on their way to check on the baby, and they're going to find him drained of his immortality, with me and Griffin standing over the crib.

I can't watch.

As the queen enters the room, I walk through a side wall, into an unused chamber.

My first response is disbelief. After everything I've been through, everything my friends and I have worked hard to achieve, I can't believe it amounted to nothing. I visited Olympus, Poseidon's palace, and Hades. I confronted the god of time, the queen of the underworld, and finally the Fates themselves. All those challenges, all those successes *can't* have been for nothing.

My second response is anger. Wrath. Pure, unadulterated fury. I met every requirement. I overcame every obstacle. I've earned the right to fix things. I've earned the right to be something more than a pawn in some twisted game.

I let out a primal scream, putting all of my fury and frustration into the release.

But the release doesn't come. The fury doesn't release, and I feel like a bottle of soda ready to explode as soon as someone loosens the cap.

There is only one way to relieve the pressure.

"Moirae!" I scream. "You tricked me! Your own daughter, you cheated me like the gods have been cheating humans for millennia! How dare you? Cowards!"

I just want to yell. I just want them to know how betrayed I feel—about everything. I know they can hear me, even in the future.

I don't expect them to show up.

When the three sisters shimmer into the spot in front of me, they don't look the least bit embarrassed. They should be ashamed or contrite or at least look guilty as Hades for sending me on a goose chase to the past.

But no, they look completely undisturbed.

"You tricked me," I accuse.

"It was no trick," the middle-aged one says.

"We told you it was illegal," the young one adds.

"Impossible," the old one corrects. "We told you it was impossible."

"Impossible," the young one agrees.

"It's not!" I insist. "It can't be."

Why else would it be illegal? Why else would they and Chronos have given me such dire warnings about changing the past unless it was *possible* for me to do so? Why bother? It doesn't make any sense.

"We did not allow it," the middle-aged one says.

The young one shakes her head.

“Why not?” I demand, feeling tears well in my eyes. “Why would you let me come back and not change anything?”

What was the point? Everything I’ve done, every risk I’ve taken . . . and it all came down to the Fates—my mothers—saying no.

This is the gods’ surprise twist at its finest. No less unfair than the original decree that set me on this path in the first place. No less cruel.

“To allow a mortal to change the course of time,” the middle-aged one—the reasonable one—explains, “would put all of time at risk.”

“Bad things,” the young one says, nodding vigorously. “Very bad things.”

The old one mutters something about “impetuous” and “youth”—honestly, who wouldn’t be young compared to her?

All of the time and energy and emotion I’ve put into the quest over the last few days just drains out of me, washing away like chalk art in a rainstorm. My entire body sags and I feel . . . defeated. This really is the end.

For ten years, I’ve been consumed by guilt. I’ve lived with it every minute of every day, dreamed of it every night. I thought that finally, after all this time, it would be over. I thought I would finally be absolved.

“Please,” I whisper, sinking to my knees on the floor. I look up at the three women, who are watching me, unseeing, with varying degrees of pity and confusion in their expressions. “If you care for me at all—if you feel bad about anything that’s happened—then please . . . *make this right.”*

The old one snorts.

The young one scowls and tilts her head.

The middle-aged one is still. Unblinking as she holds up the eye to study me. I focus on her. I stare right back, trying to convey every last ounce of my anguish through whatever means possible.

When I see a glint of moisture beneath her empty eye sockets, I feel the first spark of hope rekindle.

I don’t move, don’t breathe, don’t anything as she turns to the old one and says something in an ancient Greek dialect I can’t understand.

Their conversation is hushed and vehement. From the body language, I can tell the middle-aged one has made a suggestion, the old one disagrees, and the young one . . . well, I’m not sure she understands what’s going on any more than I do.

Finally, when I am about to pass out from holding my breath, they turn back to me. The middle-aged one steps closer and holds the eye toward me.

"We have come up with an acceptable alternative," she says.

I don't ask, *Acceptable to who?*

"We will agree to change the course of your parents' . . ." She shifts uncomfortably. "Of your *adopted* parents' lives, on one condition."

"Yes," I blurt. "Okay."

"You have not heard the condition," the old one snaps.

"It doesn't matter," I reply. "I'll do anything."

"But still, you must consider," the middle-aged one says. "The condition is this: you must accept the gift of your heritage."

"A gift?" I echo.

Like a present. That sounds like a good thing, not like something I have to weigh and consider before I decide.

Of course, this is the world of Greek mythology. Nothing is ever that straightforward. This must be the crowning surprise twist, the grand finale.

I ask, "What kind of gift?"

"An ability," the middle-aged one replies.

"Precognition," the old one grumbles.

My silence must betray my confusion, because the young one explains, "You'll see the future."

"Second sight," the middle-aged one adds.

I jerk back, leaning back into my heels. Now, that I did not expect.

Maybe I should have. After what happened in Poseidon's throne room and at the entrance to the Hall of Springtime, maybe I should have guessed this was coming.

The ability to see the future is not unheard of in the world of gods and myths, but the people who get the gift . . . well, let's just say they don't always wind up with happy endings. Cassandra went insane because no one believed her prophecies. Tiresias was blind and spent seven years as a woman. Manto was taken captive as a prize of war.

So, yeah, not great things.

But the idea that by this one simple—fine, *not* simple, but easy—action, I can make everything right with my parents? Where do I sign up?

"Yes," I say again, this time with full knowledge of what I'm accepting. "I'll do it. I'll accept the gift."

The middle-aged one extends her hand. I reach up and take it, and when I do I feel flash of light in my mind. It's like a thousand thoughts explode into my brain at once.

I close my eyes to shut out as much sensation as possible.

"You will learn to filter them," the middle-aged one promises.

"Calm your mind," the young one says.

"Focus on a single point," the old one advises. "Focus on your parents."

The moment she mentions my parents, all the random thoughts clear away and I can see my mom and dad. My *real* mom and dad—not the three women who . . . *made* me.

I open my eyes.

"They're back," I say, my voice a rough whisper. "My parents are back on Serfopoula. Back in the *hematheos* world."

I don't know how I know that, but I feel it all the way into the core of my soul. Whatever the Fates did worked. My parents are coming home.

A bubble of joy—true, honest to goodness *joy*—fills my chest. I can't even begin to describe the sense of relief.

My smile fades when the old one says, "No, not yet."

"But they soon will be," the middle-aged one says.

"That certainty you felt," the young one explains, "was your guide to the future. You saw what *will* be true."

That blows my mind more than a little. I shake my head, trying to wrap my brain around the idea—the reality—that I can now sense the future. And the fact that I've succeeded. I've completed my quest. I went back in time and, with a little extra help, changed the past.

"Until you learn to manage your new power," the old one says, "we will limit the flow of knowledge."

"Wouldn't want to overload your brain," the young one says.

The old one elbows her in the ribs.

"You should know," the middle-aged one says, in a voice that sets me immediately on alert, "that only *your* family thread has changed."

"Only my—?" The meaning of her words becomes clear before I can ask what she means. "Griffin."

She nods.

The old one says, "We cannot change his fate."

"*You* cannot change his fate," the young one adds.

"*I* can't," I echo.

I close my eyes as the middle-aged one nods. When I do, I see Griffin standing on the Academy yacht, setting a bulky backpack down on the deck as he waves good-bye to the handful of us gathered on the dock to watch him depart.

As the yacht sails away, I know—in that unknowable way—that he's starting a quest of his own.

"I can't," I say, opening my eyes. "But *he* can."

"His fate," the old one says, "his parents' fates, are only his to change."

"You cannot guide him," the middle-aged one says.

"But you can encourage him," the young one cheers. "And boy will he need your encouragement."

The old one elbows her in the side again.

"Be cautious with your gift," the middle-aged one says. "The future is a great responsibility."

Responsibility is pretty much a four-letter word to me, but I think this is one I can handle. Better me than most of the *theo*brats at the Academy. At least I know the power will be in good hands.

And because a girl doesn't change all her spots at once, I just might use that power to get the best of Headmaster Petrolas every once in a while.

"We will visit you again in the future," the old one says.

"You need training," the young one explains. "So you don't, you know, go insane."

"That would be nice," I say sarcastically.

But when the three women start to fade away, I realize it shouldn't have been a joke. It really would be nice to learn how to use this power they just gave me. And it really would be nice to see them again. They might not be my parents, but they are my mothers. I want to know them—I want to know more about them.

You shall, the voice of the middle-aged one says in my mind.

Then they're gone and I'm left alone in the past.

No point dwelling here.

I reach into my pocket and my fingers have barely closed around the gold coin from Chronos before the room around me melts away and I'm back in the pantheon temple.

13

I take a moment to process everything. It's been an overwhelming few days and the realization that I actually succeeded is . . . I'm just not sure how to believe that. It's too surreal.

After a few minutes—and a few deep breaths—I head for the temple doors. I can't stay in here forever. Besides, my best friend is waiting for me.

When I push the big gold doors aside, Troy isn't the only one waiting for me on the steps. The whole gang is here—Phoebe, Griffin, Stella, and Xander are clustered at the bottom. I stop on the top step, expecting them to pelt me with questions like they did the last two times I came out of the temple. Instead, they're silent.

"I—"

Where do I begin?

"Did Troy fill you in on what Petrolas told me?"

They all nod. Troy turns red, like I'm going to be mad about that. But I'm too happy right now to be mad about anything.

"I called them," I say. "I called the Fates. And they came."

It's like a floodgate opens. Once I start saying the words, everything comes out. I tell them about screaming at my mothers, about going back and not being able to do anything. About the second meeting with the Fates when they came back in time, too.

I don't tell them about the new power, though. Those words stay stuck in my mind, still not real enough to say out loud.

Finally, I say, "My parents are unbanished. They're free. Or at least they soon will be."

"Omigosh," Phoebe squeals, wrapping me in a big hug. "That's amazing! You did it."

I hug her back, and I wish I could share her unbridled excitement.

Griffin stands off to the side a little while everyone else cheers. I can feel the tension radiating off him from several feet away. He knows me

better than most people—better than probably anyone but Troy—and I'm sure he can see that my smile doesn't quite reach my eyes. I'm sure he noticed that I only said *my* parents, not *our* parents.

I'm excited to share the news with my friends, but it's a double-edged sword. I get my parents back, but he doesn't. Not yet.

Troy catches my eye over Phoebe's shoulder. He lifts his brows in question and I can only shake my head. His head droops and his mouth twists into a sad half smile.

I put my hands on Phoebe's shoulders and push her back.

"Give me a sec," I whisper as I walk around her, heading for Griffin.

For several long moments—it feels like forever—we just study each other. I think I'm barely breathing as Griffin's bright blue eyes burn into me.

I don't know how to say it, how to tell him that I failed.

In the end, I don't have to.

"My parents are still smoted," he says, his voice quiet and low, "aren't they?"

I nod slowly, as if that will soften the blow of the truth.

His brows pinch together. He doesn't ask why or how, but I fill in the blanks anyway.

"The Fates," I explain, "said I couldn't alter the thread of your parents' lives."

His nostrils flare and his hands clench at his sides. I don't blame him. I'd be pissed, too—I *was* pissed, when I thought I wasn't going to be able to change anything. But this doesn't have to be the end of the story.

"They said *I* couldn't," I repeat, with special emphasis on the word *I.*

The tension in his face relaxes, just a little, and he draws in a sharp breath. "*You* couldn't," he says.

I nod.

"But I can?"

I nod again.

"How?" he asks.

"I don't know," I answer honestly. "They didn't say."

He looks confused, frustrated, but—and this is the only emotion that matters—hopeful. He has hope. For the first time in a decade, Griffin truly believes that *he* will be able to fix what happened to his parents.

Without waiting for him to respond, I step forward and draw him into a tight hug. I'm not much of a hugger—that's definitely more Phoebe's style—but in this moment, with my old best friend and the joy over what I made happen and what I know he is going to make happen, I can't help myself.

Griffin hugs me back, tighter than I think I've ever been hugged. It's a cross between loss and hope.

As I squeeze harder, Troy moves into my peripheral vision. He reaches up and slips his hand over mine. I turn it so our palms are facing and our fingers can weave together.

Thank you, I mouth.

He shrugs, like it's no big deal. It's a *huge* deal. There's no way I could have done what I did without him—without all of my friends.

"Come on," I say, releasing Griffin from my hug but keeping hold of Troy's hand. "Let's go celebrate."

"Where?" Stella asks.

Phoebe suggests, "How about ice cream?"

"I could go for some rocky road," Xander says.

Stella slips her arm around his and they start walking into the village.

Phoebe gives Griffin a mischievous look before saying, "I'll race you."

They're off before he can even say, "You're on."

"Are you okay?" Troy asks as we start after our friends.

"Yeah," I say. "Why wouldn't I be?"

He tugs me closer as he gives me an are-you-joking look.

Fine, so I collected offerings from the gods, found out I'm the adopted daughter of the Fates, and went back in time to alter the course of my life. What's the big deal?

The big deal is . . . I'm the daughter of the Fates and I now have the power of precognition. For some reason, that particular turn of events is too big for me to talk about. I'm not even sure how I feel about that in my own head yet, let alone sharing it with someone else.

But as soon as I'm in that place, Troy will be the first to know.

"I'm fine," I say, finally answering his question. "Really."

For the first time in more than ten years, I finally feel like everything is going to be okay again.

The edges of my lemon-sourball double scoop haven't even started to melt when the bell above the door to the ice-cream parlor jingles. I don't look up until the dark figure bypasses the ice-cream counter and heads for our booth in the back.

"Great," I mutter.

Stella flashes the visitor a sunny grin. "Hi, Daddy."

Phoebe looks from me to her stepfather and back to me. Clearly she thinks I'm in trouble.

Not possible. Headmaster Petrolas can't possibly know—

"May I see you alone for a moment, Miss Matios," he says, pretty much ignoring everyone else at the table. He flashes me a pearly-toothed grin as he adds, "Now."

I am not fooled by the friendly facade.

"Don't eat this," I instruct Troy as I hand him my ice-cream cone and slide out of the booth.

Troy looks like I handed him a live grenade. Right, I forgot his taste buds are still cursed. Guess I don't have to worry about him consuming my celebratory treat.

I feel all five sets of eyes from my table watch as I follow Headmaster Petrolas out the front door. As the door shuts behind me, I brace myself for the lecture.

"I believe it is time you returned the book," he says without preamble.

"The what?" I ask, half-shocked and half feigning ignorance.

To be accurate, he only said *book*—singular—so I don't technically know which one he might be talking about. But I have a feeling he'd be way more furious than he seems if he was talking about the first one.

"The book from the secret archives," he explains, looking just as neutral as he had when he walked up to the booth. "*The Art and Science of Chronoportation.*"

I can't have heard him right. He can't know I took the book—*that* book—and still be asking me in such a . . . polite way.

"I'm sorry, I don't—"

"Your parents will be arriving tomorrow afternoon for a long-overdue visit," he says.

"I . . . they . . ." It's a struggle to form words into sentences at this point. "You know?"

He doesn’t respond, just cocks his head slightly to the left.

He knows.

I narrow my eyes at him. “You’ve known all along.”

He shrugs and brushes a piece of dust off his jacket sleeve. “Of course.”

Of course.

“Then why didn’t you stop me?” Or help me.

“Just because I am a . . .” He frowns, like he’s trying to concentrate. “How did you put it after the incident with the baby oil in the boys’ bathroom? A ‘tool of the gods’?”

I feel my cheeks burn. For the love of Zeus, this guy really does hear, see, and *know* everything.

“Does not mean that I blindly support their judgment,” he finishes. “I believe you deserved the chance to set things right.”

I am stunned—utterly and completely and totally shocked. Did Headmaster Petrolas—the bane of my rebellious existence at this school—really *want* me to travel back in time? To break one of the unbreakable rules and cheat fate?

“I am pleased that you have succeeded,” he says when I still can’t form words.

“I—you—” My mouth drops open as the pieces fall into place. “You made the book glow! You wanted me to find it. You set this whole thing up!”

His shrug is all the answer I need.

“Oh my gods, I can’t believe it.” I shake my head. “I should have known.”

His expression turns serious. “That is the other thing I wished to speak with you about,” he says. “Your new gift.”

“My new . . . oh. Yeah, that.”

“Yes, that.” His voice drops to a low whisper that only I can hear. “Knowledge of the future is a rare gift, Miss Matios. It will take time to refine the power.”

“So my mothers told me.”

“If you find yourself needing . . .” He hesitates, like he’s trying to pick out the perfect word. “Relief,” he finally says, “do not hesitate to ask.”

He’s so intense that it actually makes me nervous. The situation between the headmaster and me has always been just short of serious. Even

when I was in big trouble for some stunt or another, I could always sense his almost-laughter right beneath the surface.

Which is why his foreboding warning is so disconcerting.

“Right,” I say, trying to diffuse the tension. “You know, I already saw my future.”

“Oh yes?” he asks, cocking one brow up.

“Yeah.” I flash him a sly smile. “I saw a future where I don’t get in trouble for my actions anymore.”

He laughs, and that makes me feel so much better. Even after so many things have changed in such a short period of time, our little cat-and-mouse game is still intact.

“The yacht will bring your parents from Serifos at two o’clock,” he says, completely changing the subject. “When we meet at the dock to greet them . . .”

He doesn’t have to complete the sentence.

“I’ll bring the book,” I reply with a smile.

He nods, as if pleased that his nonverbal communication skills are still in working order. “And bring the second volume as well,” he says. “The one Miss Spencer secured for you from the archives.”

I don’t even bother being shocked at how he knew that Adara got me the book on the offerings for the gods. He just knows.

“I’ll see you tomorrow, then,” I say, then start back for the door.

“And Miss Matios,” he calls out before I can grab the handle.

“Yes?” I ask, wait for another shoe—knowing Petrolas, probably an expensive Italian loafer—to drop.

“Please tell Mr. Blake that the gods are likely inclined to grant a special favor,” he says, “to the last descendant of Zeus’s favorite son.”

Hercules has always been Zeus’s favorite, and Griffin is the last in the Herculean line. If Petrolas thinks that fact will get Griffin special treatment, that bodes well for his quest to get his parents back.

When I turn back around to ask him to explain, he’s already gone. That man is quick and quiet as a ninja when he wants to be. Someday I’ll get the jump on him.

As I yank open the door and return to my friends, my steps are lighter knowing that hope for Griffin is even closer than we thought.

14

When I get back to the booth, Stella is making googly eyes at Xander—and he's making them right back at her—in one corner. Phoebe and Griffin are snuggling together in the other corner. I take my seat across from Troy and grab my ice cream back.

"Hey, you ate some," I accuse, inspecting the decidedly smaller scoop on top.

His eyes widen. "It was melting."

"I thought your taste buds were still cursed."

"They're . . ." He half smirks even as his cheeks flame bright pink. "Not anymore."

I scowl, but decide that I'm in too good of a mood to pursue my usual plan of attack.

"So what did Damian want?" Phoebe asks, drawing her gaze away from Griffin.

I tell them what the headmaster said about my parents coming tomorrow and Griffin asking the gods for a favor—and leave out the part about returning the stolen book.

"That's great," Phoebe says, and her gaze shifts immediately to Griffin.

He nods several times, like he's bouncing the idea around in his mind, before saying, "I have to go."

He looks at Phoebe, like he's asking her permission.

She swats him on the shoulder. "Yes, go," she insists. "Right now."

He gives her the kind of smile that girls—yes, even not-so-girly girls like me—dream of getting. In a flash, Griffin is gone, probably zapping himself to Mount Olympus to make a plea for his case.

"I hope Damian is right," Phoebe sighs as she leans back against the seat.

"Daddy is always right," Stella insists. "Especially about these things."

As Stella starts listing her dad’s qualifications for being right, I lean my elbows on the table and take another swipe at my ice cream. It’s melting fast and I have to lick quickly to stop all the drips.

When I twist around to make sure I caught them all, I see Troy watching me. His eyes are intense and full of something I’ve never seen in them before. Interest.

“What?” I ask, kind of breathless.

He just smiles and shakes his head, but under the table I feel his fingertips tap my knee. Everything goes still around me. Without moving any other part of me, I reach down beneath the Formica surface.

I hesitate a moment—making sure I really want to do this, I really want to cross this line—before reaching forward and slipping my hand into his.

“It’s never been Adara,” he whispers. “Always you.”

As Phoebe and Stella bicker across the table, Xander watches them with undisguised amusement, and Griffin asks the gods to unsmote his parents, Troy and I stare at each other, barely breathing. Then he smiles. And I smile. And everything about both of us relaxes.

I go back to eating my ice cream, happier than I have been since . . . forever.

When Troy squeezes my hand, I squeeze back. Finally, it feels like everything is falling into place exactly how it’s supposed to be.

I’ve been waiting long enough.

Read on for more action-packed adventure where

MYTHOLOGY

meets

MODERN LIFE

CHAPTER 1

GRETCHEN

Hydras have a distinctive odor. It's somewhere between the acid tang of burning hair and a boat full of rotting fish. You can smell them from miles away.

Well, you can't. But I can.

Some beasties smell mildly unpleasant; others could peel paint. Hydras definitely fall into the latter category.

As I steer my car—Moira, named for the fickle fates as a constant reminder to take charge of mine—into a spot across from a dilapidated seafood shack, the stench is practically overwhelming. Moira's upholstery is going to stink for a week. I pencil in taking her to the car wash on my mental to-do list, right after replacing my favorite cargo pants, which got shredded in my last fight, but before polishing the bladed weapons in the armory.

I twist the key out of the ignition and do a quick gear check: Kevlar wrist cuffs in place, smoke bombs in left cargo pocket, zip ties in the right, and my handy-dandy, military-grade, metal detector–defying, twin APS daggers snug in their sheaths and hidden inside my steel-toe Doc Martens. Nothing like a well-stocked pair of black cargoes to make me feel girly.

The hydra shouldn't be much trouble—balancing nine heads on a massive serpent body throws off their center of gravity so they're not exactly graceful—but it never hurts to be prepared.

Even if I ever get caught off guard, I've got a backup monster-fighting kit stowed under Moira's driver's seat and another in my backpack.

Though the gear makes things easier, all I really need to take a beastie out is the pair of retracted canines that will fang down at the first sign of

trouble. They're my built-in secret weapon. A defense legacy passed down from my ancient ancestor.

"Seriously," I mutter as I climb out onto the sidewalk. "Can't they give it a rest for a while? Maybe take an extended vacation somewhere cold and icy."

This is the fourth time in the last week that the aroma of dark and nasty has pulled me out for the hunt.

One more visitor from the abyss this week and I'll leave the gear at home and work out my annoyance with my fists. Hand-to-hand combat won't send a monster back to its prison-realm home, but it'll make me feel a hell of a lot better. Who says keeping the human world monster-free can't be good therapy at the same time?

I palm the remote for Moira's keyless entry and am about to lock her sleek, black doors when I realize I've forgotten one element of my monster-fighting gear that is critical, at least when I'm hunting in human-heavy territory.

"Slick, Gretchen," I tell myself. "Real slick."

You'd think after four years—a quarter of my life—this would be second nature.

Moments later, I'm crossing the street, my sporty mirrored sunglasses shielding my eyes. Not from the sun, of course. It's not like hydras yearn for daylight. No, they'd rather drag me out in the middle of the night, when dives like this are the only thing open.

Darn inconsiderate when school starts tomorrow.

I walk up to the weathered wooden shack, peer through the dirt- and grime-crusted window, and scan the late-night diners. All distinctly human.

If my eyes weren't practically tearing at the stench, I'd think the hydra wasn't here.

Then I catch sight of the narrow staircase off to the right of the bar, leading to an upstairs dining room. Well, at least that will make cornering it easier.

As I push open the door, the combination of putrid eau de hydra and decades of fried-fish-filet residue is enough to make me nearly lose my heat-and-eat lasagna all over the sandy floor.

But I don't have time for nausea. There's a bloodthirsty monster prowling for a meal, and if I don't stop it, no one will. I'm the only one who

can see it.

“Anyone see a slithering nine-headed serpent pass this way?”

I snicker. I would love to see the reaction if I actually asked the question loud enough for anyone to hear.

Then again, this is San Francisco. They might not react at all.

Bypassing the drowsy bartender, I head for the staircase. Monsters generally prefer dark corners and back alleys—and, apparently, second-floor dining areas—which makes them occasionally harder to find but easier to attack. They’ll take any less-populated area that’s available, though, which is fine by me. The fewer witnesses to our fights, the better. The safer. The human world doesn’t need to know monsters walk among them. As long as I do my job right, they never will.

I’m up the stairs, three at a time, in five seconds flat. The instant I step out onto the second floor, I see it, cozying up to a trampy redhead doing her best impersonation of a low-class prostitute. Monsters have the worst taste in women.

I scan the room, checking for potential threats and exits. Besides the stairs behind me, there’s an emergency exit at the back. If I position myself behind the redhead, I’ll be able to intercept on either path.

As for threats, there’s a pair of mounted swordfish displayed on the wall and some framed pictures of deep-sea fishing boats that might hurt if used as projectiles. Nothing really to worry about.

Thankfully, the dining area is sparsely populated. Other than the hydra and its prey there is only a trio of drunken businessmen at the far end. Judging from their raucous volume and the disheveled state of their ties, odds are they’re probably pretty much oblivious to anything but the next round. If I do this right, they won’t notice a thing.

Straightening my back, I march over to the unlucky couple and tap the girl on the shoulder, making sure I’m centered between the stairs and the door.

“Can I help you?” Red snaps in a very nonsolicitous tone.

“Yes,” I reply. “You can leave.”

“Excuse me?” She crosses her arms defiantly under her chest, like I’m going to be frightened away by her aggressive boobage. “I don’t know who you think you are, but—”

With a quick flick of my wrist, I pop my sunglasses up and lean down to look her directly in the eye.

“You were just leaving,” I say, keeping my tone even.

Her eyes widen as her brain disengages. “I was just leaving,” she repeats.

Then, as if pulled by some unseen rope, she stands and crosses to the stairs, disappearing out of view. When the hypno wears off, she’ll wonder how she got wherever she’s going. But serpent-beastie will be long gone by then.

With the girl safely out of the way, I evaluate the now standing hydra. From the necks down it looks like an overgrown lizard who’s been hitting the gym. Too muscular for my taste—I don’t go for the bulging reptilian type—but I can see how some girls might want to hit that. From the necks up . . . well, whoever said two heads are better than one never met a hydra.

Too bad humans can’t see its real form.

All monsters can affect a sort of false appearance—in faerie circles known as a glamour—so their hideous, grotesque features are hidden from unsuspecting human eyes. Unfortunately for the monsters, I’m not an unsuspecting human. I’m a descendant of Medusa, and I suspect a whole heck of a lot. My eyes see their true nature, and this beastie’s true nature is a slimy, scaly, nine-headed snake. Not exactly the perfect specimen Red thought she was getting.

The hydra’s eyes lock on mine before I drop my sunglasses back into place. Too bad my freaky hypnosis power only works on humans. Then again, that would make my job way too easy. Where’s the fun in that?

“Huntress,” it snarls.

“I prefer Gretchen. But, you know.” I flash it a bored look. “Whatever.”

The freak show moves awkwardly, its undulating tail taking out a couple of chairs.

I check over my shoulder to make sure the drunken trio hasn’t noticed—they haven’t—then turn back to face my foe. It might look big and scary, but this isn’t my first hydra rodeo. I know just how to take it down.

As the freak show reaches for me, I spin right, dodging the grab and sending the monster lurching forward. With the creature off-balance, I take a well-aimed leap onto its back. It writhes, trying to throw me off. I wrap my legs around the scaly body and my arms around one of the necks and

squeeze. The table goes flying. I need to hurry, before someone decides to notice all the noise.

Inching my way down its back, I lean off to one side, searching for the spot where its thick, armorlike scales give way to a softer underbelly. My fangs drop. I dive forward, sink my fangs into the tender flesh, and sigh as my snake-girl venom pours into its bloodstream.

There is no better feeling than this sweet surge of victory.

In a flash, it’s gone and I’m thudding to my knees on the floor.

Bye-bye, beastie.

CHAPTER 2

GRACE

Things are going to be different in San Francisco. I mean, obviously things *are* different—like the mega-tall buildings, the millions of people, and the predominance of concrete over grass. This town is pretty much the complete opposite of Orangevale in every way.

But I want Grace Whitfield—*me*—to be different too.

Frozen like a statue on the sidewalk, I stare up at the imposing facade of Alpha Academy, the private prep school whose full-scholarship offer is half the reason we've moved to the city. It's a giant cube of glass and steel, a monument to modernity that makes the simple single-story stucco and Spanish tile of Orangevale High look like something from California's prehistoric past. This building gleams shiny and new in the morning sun. The perfect place to start over. I know this is the opportunity I've been waiting for all my life. After sixteen years in the same small burb, going to the same schools with the same students, I finally get to be someone new. Someone not me.

Before I can smile at the thought, a person knocks into my shoulder, sending me and my backpack tumbling.

"Excuse you much?" The girl gives me a disgusted look, dusts off her shoulder like I might have given her a virus, and stomps off toward the sparkling glass double doors.

Everything about her screams *confident.* Rich brown hair with auburn highlights that swings as she walks, dark-wash skinny jeans and a magenta V-neck sweater that cling to every single curve, and (most of all) the superior-to-absolutely-everyone attitude. Just as different from me as San Francisco is from Orangevale.

The new me should say something to her retreating back. I *want* to say something like *No, excuse* you *much*, since she, you know, crashed into me. But I don't. I stand there, watching her disappear into my new school, a huge lump of dread in my stomach at the realization that nothing has changed. I'm still the same old Grace, the quiet, passive pushover who can't stand up for herself.

So much for different.

"Grace Whitfield?"

I look up from my spot on the bench across from the guidance counselor's office. The counselor, the woman who just called my name, gives me an encouraging smile.

She looks nothing like the balding, middle-aged, tweed coat–wearing counselor in Orangevale. The one who'd rubber-stamped all my advising sessions and handed me the appropriate papers about SAT prep classes before checking off my name and moving on to the next kid on the list. Not that I needed his help—I know what I have to do to get into a good school and earn a scholarship—but it might have been nice if he'd looked up from his computer for two seconds.

My new counselor has all of her attention focused on me, and commands my attention in return. I can't help but study her immaculate appearance. She's tall and graceful, like a ballerina, and wears a sharply tailored skirt suit in a soft, warm gray that matches her high heels. A petal-pink blouse ruffles out around her lapels. Although her image says poised and elegant, I get the feeling that beneath the surface she is a woman of extraordinary strength.

She seems like she could run a billion-dollar company in her spare time. She would never let anyone plow over her and march off without a word. I'm an eco-geek who can't even walk into my new school without getting trampled by another student.

I stand, feeling awkward and underdressed in my recycled jeans, organic green tee, and hot-pink Chuck Taylors. Not only because of the counselor, but also because of confident girl and the few students who've trickled in through the office while I've been waiting. They look like they walked out of a department-store window display.

Too late to change now. Besides, it's not like I have high levels of fashion hiding in my closet. Mostly more of the same.

"I'm Grace," I say, extending my hand.

I expect her to shake it, formal and businesslike, but instead she holds it gently and presses her other palm over mine. Her smile positively sparkles. She gives me a squeeze as she says, "I'm Ms. West. I recommended you for the scholarship here at Alpha. You shone above all the other applicants. Your computer skills were especially impressive."

"I—" I swallow over the strange feeling of tightness—of pride, maybe—in my throat. A good feeling. "Thank you."

"After reviewing your admissions exam and your previous school records, I have prepared a preliminary class schedule for you," she explains as she motions me into her office.

I rub my hands against my jeans as I follow her inside.

Other than the small acrylic sign on her desk that says STEPHANIE WEST, GUIDANCE COUNSELOR, the sleek gray surface is virtually empty. In fact, the office is pretty much empty. Only the desk, chairs, a pair of tall file cabinets, and, on the wall behind her desk, a massive framed photo of a beautiful white sand beach and a turquoise sea. No clutter, no color other than the water in the picture. It's very calming. Which is, I suppose, a good quality in a counselor's office.

Ms. West lowers herself gracefully into the big black leather office chair, indicating that I should take a seat in one of the armchairs facing her desk. I choose the one on the right, swinging my backpack to the floor as I sit.

"Considering your plans to attend a top-tier college," she says, handing me a sheet of paper, "I thought you might be interested in adding a second foreign language."

"Do you think that's necessary?" I ask. "Will it help my admissions chances?"

"It certainly doesn't hurt." She looks me in the eye as she speaks. "But I think your transcript is strong already."

"Then I think I'll stick with Spanish." I appreciate her honest answer.

"All right," she says. "What about a physical education class? We offer a broad selection, including virtually all sports, as well as kickboxing and Tae Kwon Do."

My records must not have been too enlightening, because she clearly doesn't get me at all. Give me a laptop or a smartphone, and I'm an all-star, but athletics is a bit beyond my skill set. I'm not a superklutz or anything, I'm merely lacking in the finer points of hand-eye coordination beyond basic keyboard functions.

When I shake my head again, she pulls out a folder from her desk drawer and opens it, turning to a sheet of green paper near the back.

"Alpha is dedicated to providing our students with a well-rounded education in a variety of disciplines, not focused exclusively on rigorous academics." She smiles as she scans the paper. "The elective opportunities are truly astounding. I'm sure you will find something to your liking."

The green sheet she hands me must have almost fifty classes listed.

The choices are a little overwhelming. At Orangevale High we had your standard math, language arts, sciences, history, foreign languages (Spanish or French), and one elective. Our elective choices were limited to art, choir, band, or study hall. It's hard to wrap my public-school brain around the array of private-school electives. "I don't know. I guess, maybe—"

"You don't have to decide right now," she interrupts. "Orientation and convocation will take up most of today. Why don't you take the list home and decide tonight? You can come by before school and let me know what courses you've chosen."

"Great," I say as I slip the paper into my backpack.

We spend the next few minutes going over the schedule for today, my core class schedule for tomorrow, graduation and extracurricular requirements, and things like dress code and attendance policies. Mom, Dad, and I already filled out a mountain of paperwork over the summer—hasn't this school heard of electronic forms?—but there are still a few for me to sign.

I wonder if my brother, Thane, is going through the same thing at his school.

"Are you ready for your first day at Alpha?" Ms. West asks with an enthusiastic smile.

I take a deep breath. *Am* I ready? New home, new city, new school, new friends. Hopefully. New life. New me.

I feel equal parts fear and anticipation. But one look in Ms. West's sharp eyes and I feel a jolt of confidence. I feel strong and invincible. How can I

let myself be afraid of change, when it's what I want? The chance to become the strong, confident young woman I've always dreamed of being.

This is the first step.

"Yes," I say, gathering my courage. "Ready."

"Do you have any questions or concerns before I send you to class?"

I square my shoulders and shake my head. I'm ready for this.

"If you need anything," she says, "my office door is always open."

I nod, trying to mimic the same air of self-assurance she exudes, as if I appreciate her offer but will never need the help because everything will work out in no time. The facade makes me feel a little more sure of myself, of my future at Alpha and in San Francisco.

The power of positive thinking.

She leans out into the hall. "Miranda, would you come here please?"

When Miranda shows up at Ms. West's door, my false confidence quivers and that sense of dread plops into my stomach again.

"Yes, Ms. West?" asks the girl who plowed through me in front of the school.

"This is Grace Whitfield," she explains, gesturing to me. "She's new at Alpha. Since you two have the same homeroom, I thought you might give her a quick tour and then show her to class."

"Of course," Miranda says with a blinding fake smile. "It'd be my pleasure."

Think positive, I tell myself. Maybe I misinterpreted her earlier comment. Maybe she's a really nice person. Maybe she'll be friendly, now that she knows we share a class. Hitching my backpack up on my shoulder, I smile and hold out my hand. "Nice to meet you, Miranda."

She smiles and shakes my hand. For a second I believe this positive thinking thing really works. Then, as soon as Ms. West turns back to her desk, Miranda drops my hand like it's a plague-ridden rat, rolls her eyes, and stalks out of the office.

My shoulders sink.

"Have a wonderful first day," Ms. West says.

"Thanks," I say, turning to give her a quick wave before following after Miranda's retreating back.

As I stand outside the girls' bathroom, waiting for Miranda to emerge, I'm pretty certain this isn't what Ms. West had in mind for a school tour. After throwing me a look that said she'd rather eat glass than lead around a loser like me, Miranda stalked off into the hall outside the main office and made a beeline for the bathroom.

She's been in there for over five minutes.

I glance at my schedule. Every day at Alpha begins with homeroom, an hour-long period for finishing up homework, going to the library, or seeking help from other teachers. Nothing like the twenty-minute roll call and stay-in-your-seats-for-announcements madness that passed for homeroom at Orangevale. Homeroom here sounds useful.

Around me, the hall is starting to fill with students. The typical first-day-of-school insanity. Girls are shrieking, diving into group hugs with friends they haven't seen all summer. A few couples are taking advantage of the chaos to engage in some pretty inappropriate kissing and groping. Some kids, probably freshmen, are wandering around looking slightly lost and terribly frightened. That won't be me—I won't let it. I'm a junior now, an upperclassman, and I'm not going to let the unfamiliar environment make me feel like a lowly freshman again. No thank you.

I've never been a Girl Scout, I don't even know their motto, but I still believe in being prepared. I swing my backpack around and dig through the pile of papers Ms. West gave me until I find the school map printed on the back of the "Welcome to Alpha!" letter. According to my schedule, I have Mrs. Deckler for homeroom in room 117.

After tracing my finger over most of the ground floor, I find room 117 in a back corner. I squint at the map—it's no 3D-rendered interactive virtual environment, but it'll do—and then scan the hall, deciding that if I go to the end of the main hall and turn left, I'll find my classroom.

Miranda's still in the bathroom though. And, as much as I think she'd be overjoyed to find me gone, I don't want to pull a disappearing flake act on the first day.

I continue studying my map, trying to get a feel for the layout of the school, mentally extruding the walls and creating an image of the building in my mind. There are four floors, with the upper levels reserved for grades five through eight. All of my classes will be on the first two floors, so I focus on those maps. It's when I'm scanning over my current location that I

see what—after waiting ten minutes—I should have already guessed. The girls' bathroom has two entrances.

With a groan, I zip my backpack shut and head down the hall toward room 117, clutching my map and schedule. I don't need to pop into the bathroom to know that Miranda's long gone.

I follow the gleaming white hall past open classrooms and walls of lockers. At the end, I make a left, proud of my map-reading skills. Four doors later I find Mrs. Deckler's class.

And I'm not at all surprised to find Miranda already in her desk when I walk into the room.

Pausing for a second in the doorway, I give myself a little pep talk.

This is it, I tell myself. *This is the moment to leave doormat Grace behind and become . . . fearless Grace.* Confident *Grace.* If I take the offensive, I can turn this moment around. I can make sure that my time at Alpha isn't spent feeling powerless. I take a deep breath, form the words of a biting, witty comment in my mind, and open my mouth.

"Did you get lost?" Miranda asks before I can utter a sound. "I waited outside the bathroom for like ten minutes."

"I—" How do I respond to that? A complete and total lie. "What?"

She leans forward, as if to say something confidential, but her whisper is anything but quiet. "Are you constipated? Nurse Callahan probably has some laxatives or something."

Most of the dozen or so kids in the half-full classroom erupt in barely concealed snorts and giggles. Whatever reputation-establishing comment I'd been about to make completely evaporates into abject humiliation. My cheeks burn to the point of combustion. My ears quickly follow. Every life-changing hope I had bursts like a bubble hitting concrete. There is no recovering from a comment like that. Ever.

Tales of my digestive distress will probably circulate throughout the school by lunchtime. Even freshmen will feel sorry for me, while being thankful it's not them being thrown under the social bus.

I do the only thing I can do; I duck my head and hurry to the back of the classroom. Slipping into an empty desk, I make myself as small and invisible as humanly possible.

"Miranda is a vortex of evil."

I look up from being preoccupied with my backpack—aka pretending to be too busy to notice the stares and snickers—to find the girl in the next desk over studiously doodling on her spiral-bound.

“I’m sorry?” I ask, not sure she actually said something.

She jerks her head, sending a wave of black hair with white tips in Miranda’s general direction at the front of the room. “Never apologize for Miranda bashing. It’s my favorite pastime.”

“Oh.” Looks like I’m not the only person on the receiving end of Miranda’s bad attitude.

“I see we’re trying out a new hairstyle to start the school year, Vail.” The teacher behind the big wooden desk smiles at the girl next to me. “Shall we expect new colors weekly?”

Vail shrugs and goes back to her drawings.

As Mrs. Deckler enlists Miranda’s help to hand out some paperwork, I lean slightly to my left and say, “I’m Grace Whitfield.”

The only indication that she hears me is a momentary pause in the motion of her pencil. A hesitation over the next eye socket in a sea of skulls and crossbones. Then, as Miranda passes between us and *accidentally* drops my paper onto the floor, my neighbor mutters, “Suck a lemon, Sanders.”

“Couldn’t afford to dye all your hair, Vail?” Miranda pretends to carefully set a paper on Vail’s desk before sending it sailing into the aisle. “Next time I’ll lend you the fifty cents.”

“Save it for your implants fund.”

Vail flashes a sympathetic look at Miranda’s less-than-overflowing chest. A giggle escapes before I can help it. I smack a hand over my mouth when Miranda spears me with a death look. Then, apparently deciding to pretend to take the high road, she stalks off. Vail goes back to her doodling. I swallow my laughter.

“I wish I could do that.” I sigh.

“What?”

“Tell off girls like that,” I explain, leaning down to grab both our papers off the floor. “My mind always freezes.”

For several long moments I think she’s not going to respond. Her attention is fully focused on filling in the spaces between her skulls and crossbones with smiley faces. As I set her paper on the edge of her desk, I notice that the smiley faces have fangs.

I shrug and start reading over my paper, a pretty standard set of classroom rules.

Mrs. Deckler gets up and clears her throat like she's going to start reading the rules or something, and Vail finally says, "Standing up to Miranda is easy." She pulls the rules sheet on top of her notebook and turns her doodling attention to the pink handout. "You just have to stop caring what she thinks."

As Mrs. Deckler starts droning on about attendance policies and how to ask for a library or study pass, I sink farther into my desk. That's my problem. I can't *stop* caring what the Mirandas of the world think of me.

Unless something dramatic happens, San Francisco Grace is going to have pretty much the same experience as Orangevale Grace. Guess I'll have to get used to doormat status.

CHAPTER 3

GRACE

My head bounces against the window as the city bus hits a pothole. At this point, accidentally getting knocked unconscious would give me a welcome excuse for forgetting my first day at Alpha. Is a little amnesia too much to ask for?

Except for the mild welcome from Vail in homeroom, the rest of the day has gone pretty much according to Miranda's evil plan. Why didn't I stand up to her when I had the chance? Too bad real life doesn't have Pause and Rewind. My first day would have gone infinitely better if I could have stopped time long enough to think up a comeback for Miranda's snark.

Instead, I spent all day replaying the moment in my mind.

The bus driver announces my stop. Slinging my backpack over my shoulder, I stand and move to the back doors. I'm about to step down into the stairwell when the bus pulls away from the curb. I hold on to a pole to keep from flying into a little old Chinese lady's lap. The bag in her arms squirms, and I'm half afraid there's a live chicken in there.

"Excuse me," I say, trying to get the driver's attention.

He ignores me, continuing through the intersection and to the next stop, where another passenger pushes past me out the door. I hurry down the steps and leap to the sidewalk before the bus can take off again. Guess I'm too used to school bus drivers, who are required to make sure you get off at your stop. City bus drivers don't seem to care.

As I trudge the extra two uphill blocks back to our street, I make a mental list of anything good that happened today. I know Mom is going to ask, and I want her to think everything's great.

Let's see, there was Vail in homeroom. She didn't exactly go out of her way to be friendly, but she wasn't horribly rude, either. Which is more than

I can say about the rest of Alpha. That's something.

There was the counselor, Ms. West, who seemed pretty cool. Mrs. Deckler was nice too, and already knew I'd have English with her in addition to homeroom. Counselors and teachers in Orangevale never cared that much.

And I have a whole world of electives to choose from. I browsed them at lunch—having no one to eat with, I slipped away to the library to eat my avocado-and-sprouts sandwich alone—and narrowed down my selection to about five choices. With no first-day-of-school homework, picking my electives is my main task for the night.

I reach our block, and while I dig out my key ring, I try to focus on the positive. Mom worries, and I don't want her to think I'm unhappy at the new school. Even if I am.

No, I have to give it more than a day. Tomorrow could be infinitely better. It can hardly be worse. I can't act *less* confident.

In Orangevale I never had to use house keys. Mom was always home, the door unlocked, ready with an after-school snack. Our building in San Francisco is a multistory U-shaped thing with a locked front gate leading into the courtyard and a locked main entrance. The only ways inside are using a key, getting buzzed in by a tenant, or sneaking in after someone else. I tried that last one the first day in town and got a dirty look from one of our neighbors, so I don't think I'll be using the sneaking-in technique again.

The key turns easily in the lock and the gate swings open with a high-pitched squeak. I make sure it closes and locks behind me before heading toward the door. I love the courtyard. It's full of shady trees and brightly colored tropical flowers that smell like I've always imagined Hawaii would. A little piece of paradise in the big city.

At the lime-green front door I flip to another key on my ring. Everything—the door, the trees, the flowers—is a stark contrast of color against the bright white of the building rising up on three sides. Too bad the interior isn't as vibrant and cheerful.

I head into the gloomy hallway, with its dark wood floor and insufficient lighting. It creeps me out a little. Too many shadows and hidden corners.

I hurry to the stairwell and run to the second floor. After one near-death experience in the classic—aka creaky and ancient—elevator, I've decided I could use the exercise of taking the stairs.

At our apartment door, I select the third and final key on my ring and burst inside. My rotten day forgotten, I set my backpack on the dining table and follow the smell of brownies to the kitchen.

"Mom, I'm home!" I shout, grabbing a still-warm treat from the piled-high plate on the counter.

She emerges from the back hall wearing paint-spattered jeans and a matching smock. Since we've been in the apartment only a little over a week, she's still finishing up the decorating and unpacking. Judging from the shade of soft taupe dominating her clothes, I'd guess she's tackling the master bedroom today.

"So . . ." she prods with a huge smile on her round face, "how was your first day? Tell me everything."

As a rule, I don't lie to my parents. I don't even usually keep things from them. We're very close, and I want it to stay that way. But this move has been difficult in so many ways—the long family talks after I got the scholarship, the concerns about uprooting me and Thane in the middle of our high school careers, the last-minute decision that meant a last-minute move. If Dad hadn't gotten that promotion to the San Francisco office, we'd still be in Orangevale.

Now Dad's working crazy hours, and I know Mom is still stressed about everything. I don't want her worrying that we've made the wrong decision, which is why I smile and say, "It was great. I think Alpha is going to be really good for me."

"Thank goodness," she says, ignoring her freshly painted state and rushing forward to wrap me in a tight Mom hug. "I was so worried."

"And all for nothing," I tease. Mission accomplished. Mom is relieved, which means the smile on my face isn't as forced as it was a minute ago. "You've got brownie in your hair."

She runs her fingers through her black-brown waves. "Did I get it?"

"I'm not sure," I say, leaning in to inspect. "I can't tell under all that paint."

"Ha ha." She teasingly smacks me on the shoulder. "Not funny."

I shrug. "I thought it was."

She steps around me into the kitchen and heads for the sink.

"And you found the bus and everything easily enough?" she asks over her shoulder.

"Mmm-hmmm," I say around my mouthful of brownie. Mom doesn't need to know about the bad bus driver any more than she needs to know about Miranda or my solo lunch in the library.

Mom busies herself with washing the few dishes in the sink while I finish my brownie. Moist, chocolaty goodness. The perfect cure for my disappointing day.

I pour myself a glass of pineapple Fanta to wash down the last crumbs.

"Where's Thane?" I ask after a big gulp. "Isn't he home yet?"

"The public schools have a later schedule. He gets out twenty minutes after you," she answers, drying her hands on a kitchen towel. "He should be home soon. Do you need anything?"

"Nope, I'm good."

"Okay, then I'll get back to my painting." Her smile is thrilled but weary. She's excited to be making over the apartment, but also exhausted. "Shout if you need anything."

"Want some help?" I offer. With no homework to do, I need something to distract me from the mental replay of today's lowlights.

"That's sweet," she says, "but I'm almost done." At my skeptical look, she adds, "Really."

"You're sure?" When she nods, I say, "Okay." I refill my Fanta and head for the dining table.

I pull out the packet of Alpha Academy papers the counselor gave me this morning and dig for the electives lists. I have to choose two, in addition to Spanish, and the first one is easy. I don't boast about it much, but I'm a bit of a computer geek. Okay, I'm a serious computer geek. Ever since I got my first laptop in third grade, I've been fascinated by computers and technology. It's my dream to work for one of the big software companies someday.

I circle Computer Science on the list.

The other elective, however, is a harder choice.

At lunch I marked stars next to Journalism and Yearbook. I've always been intrigued by the media. I don't have any experience, but I'm sure I could learn the necessary programs easily enough. But then this afternoon I

overheard someone say that Miranda is social editor on the school paper, and I don't need that conflict. I erase the star next to journalism.

For some reason I also starred Ancient Greek and Tae Kwon Do. When Ms. West suggested languages and athletics this morning, they didn't sound appealing at all. But as I read over the list, they started to look kind of interesting. Now, in the quiet of our apartment, they seem weird again. When would I ever use Greek? And my trying martial arts would probably only lead to injury—mine or someone else's. I erase both stars.

The last star is on Pottery and Sculpture. When I was in elementary school, I always loved art classes when we got to be hands-on with clay. I was never any good at it, but it was fun. It might be a nice reprieve from the rigorous academics at Alpha. It wouldn't do anything for my college applications, though.

I'm about to erase the remaining stars and circle Yearbook when the lock on the front door clicks open. There is no other sound, just the whisper of a breeze against my back as the door soundlessly swings open. I know it's Thane. No one moves as quietly as my brother. He's like a ninja cat burglar.

If we paired his stealth with my computer skills, we could be an epic spy team.

"Hey, Thane," I say without turning around. I draw a dark circle around my elective choice. "How was school?"

"Fine."

Did I mention that Thane isn't big on talking either? Some days I think he's a recovering mime. But I know he's just really thoughtful. He spends a lot of time in his head. He also has some emotional baggage—protective walls that none of us have been able to fully crack. We chip pieces away from time to time, but mostly his life before he came to live with us is a well-guarded mystery.

"You must be Grace," another, brighter boy voice says. "Thane told me all about you."

Jerking back from the table and nearly knocking my chair over, I turn to see who Thane has brought home.

My breath catches in my throat.

The boy standing at my brother's side is, in a word, adorable. I'm completely struck. He's taller than Thane by a couple of inches, making

him about six foot. His dark hair falls in haphazard curls over his brow, his ears, and the collar of his rugby shirt. His eyes are a pale mint green with a light-brown ring around the pupil. And his mouth is spread in a wide, curving smile, showing bright teeth and a charming set of dimples.

Maybe *adorable* doesn't cover it.

"H-h-hi," I manage, looking away from his beautiful eyes.

I know I haven't got much of a backbone in general, but I don't usually lose the ability to speak complete words. There's something about him, about the whole package, that makes my skin tingle all over.

I've never reacted like this to a boy before. Sure, I've had my share of crushes and loves from afar, and even a quasi sort of boyfriend freshman year. None of them caused this whole-body reaction.

"This is Milo," Thane says, seemingly oblivious to my transformation into girl drool, thankfully. "He's a goalie."

Holy goalie.

Well, soccer explains Milo's presence. Thane may be quiet and shy and reserved in real life, but he comes alive on the soccer field. He's a completely different person when he's chasing down a ball or taking aim at the goal. Soccer is practically his life.

He says he doesn't want to play professionally. I don't know why not. I'm pretty sure he could if he wanted to.

"We have physics together," Milo says, dropping into the chair at the head of the table. "Homework on the first day." He shakes his head. "What kind of teacher does that? Pure evil, I'm telling you."

Thane slips through the kitchen to tell Mom he's home, and I'm still struck silent by Milo's presence when my brother gets back. Thane takes the chair across the table from me and pulls out his textbook. He grumbles, "Homework."

"Uh, yeah," I say, my brain suddenly demanding that I figure out a way to stay here at this table. No matter what. "Me too."

Wait. Why did I say that? I don't have any homework. I don't even have any textbooks. I'm losing my mind.

"We were going to do our homework and then, after dinner, go on a tour of the neighborhood. I'm kind of an expert." Milo sets his homework out on the table. "You interested?"

Uh, yeah!

No, keep it cool, Grace. Don’t act like a total freakazoid.

“Sure,” I say, forcing myself to sound casual and not insta-stalker scary. “Sounds fun.”

Milo smiles and then flips open his physics book and starts on his homework. I glance up to find Thane staring at me, his dark-gray eyes unreadable. I raise my brows. He shifts his attention to his textbook.

After living in the same house for so long, I’m pretty much used to Thane’s odd, silent behavior. If he has something to say, he’ll say it. He just doesn’t have much to say very often. I shrug it off and instead focus on trying to find something in my backpack that can pass for homework.

Finding nothing, I dart to my room and grab my laptop off the desk. I can always find something to do with a computer.

Back at the table, I wake up my laptop and click open the word processor. In a new document, I start composing a list of things I want to change about my life. Starting with finding the ability to talk to cute boys.

I’m a little amazed that Mom approved this evening field trip. Thrilled, but amazed. She’s always been a little more on the overprotective-of-her-chicks side, and letting us both out into the big bad city after dark is uncharacteristic.

But then again, I’m sure she and Dad could use a night alone. They haven’t had a moment of peace since we started packing up the old house.

Plus we both have cell phones, bus passes, and—I steal a glance at Milo—a native guide. Of course, Mom didn’t know that, instead of walking around our neighborhood, we’d catch the bus heading to Fisherman’s Wharf to join the sea of tourists.

“Coach Guerrera likes to run the forwards into the ground for the first week,” Milo tells Thane as the bus bounces down the street. “But after that he lets up. I think he just wants to weed out the quitters.”

Thane nods.

Apparently that is enough of an answer for Milo, because he keeps on talking soccer. “He used to play professionally in Argentina, so he’s got the legs to back up his demands.”

I kind of tune out the words. Other than to watch Thane play, soccer is not really of interest to me.

Milo, on the other hand, is definitely of interest. And talkative—especially when Mom was peppering him with questions over dinner. Already I know he is a Bay Area native, is a senior like Thane, has three older sisters, and hates mushroom pizza and avocado. Oh well, he can't be one-hundred-percent perfect.

With each bump in the road, Milo's dark-brown curls bounce as if gravity has no control over them. It makes me smile every time.

"This is our stop," Milo says as the bus pulls up in front of a hotel.

I jump up to follow him and Thane to the door, not wanting to get stuck on a bus for a second time today. The street we're on is practically deserted, but one block north we step into a churning ocean of people, all ages and sizes and nationalities.

Distracted from my Milo watching, I gawk at the bustle of activity. There are street performers dressed as break-dancing robots or playing unrecognizable exotic instruments beneath giant crab sculptures. A woman in a long, exotic print dress with a shawl over her head tries to give me something, but Milo waves her off. He doesn't stop the man who hands me a brochure for a Bay cruise. It's utter chaos, but somehow everything flows perfectly together, like some kind of crazy, hectic ballet.

I'm surrounded by energy and I try to absorb as much as I can.

I follow the boys onto the pier, sticking close so we don't get separated. I'm pretty sure I'd never find them again. As we push through the Thursday-night crowd, I marvel at all the shops: seashells and pearls, souvenirs, socks, bath salts, candy, and crystals, restaurants serving seafood and ice cream and a hundred kinds of crepes.

No wonder this is such a popular tourist attraction.

"Watch out," Milo says, tugging me against his side as a tourist with a camera the size of my head nearly knocks me over. "You okay?" he asks.

I nod, dazzled by the feel of Milo against me. "Yeah, thanks."

"No problem." He beams, and for a second it feels like we're completely alone in the crowd.

"I'm hungry," Thane says, killing our moment.

"We just ate," I complain, mostly because Milo's attention—and his hand—is now off me.

"Me too." Milo agrees with Thane. "Everything here is overpriced for the tourists. Have you guys ever had dim sum?"

Had it? I've never even heard of it. Still, even though I know it's a bonehead answer, I'm on the verge of saying, *All the time,* because I don't want Milo to think I'm an uncultured hick. "Sure—"

Before I can finish, Thane says, "No."

"Excellent!" Milo's eyes light up brighter than before, and I'm really glad I didn't get the chance to fib.

"—I haven't," I finish quietly.

The look Thane throws me suggests he knew what I'd actually been about to say.

"Then I'll get to introduce you to it." Milo starts walking back in the direction we've come from and then off to the west. "The best all-night dim sum in town is only a cable car ride away."

I have to practically jog to keep up with his long strides. We cross to a dead-end street where a line of people stand waiting. They're all looking expectantly up the hill. I turn and see an ancient-looking cable car gliding down toward the dead end.

When I knew for sure we'd be moving to San Francisco, I researched the city online. I read a lot about the cable cars and their history and construction. I know the ropes and brakes are supposed to be safe, but I'm not entirely convinced. As I watch the people climb off and the car execute a complicated, man-powered turnaround, I'm getting a little apprehensive.

"Don't worry," Milo says quietly in my ear. "It's fun."

A warm, melty feeling spreads from my ear to the rest of my body. I smile and let him lead me to a seat while he and Thane stand, hanging out over the street. I look around and see that other riders are hanging out over the street too, but it doesn't make me any less nervous.

My eyes stay squeezed tightly shut most of the ride, so I don't remember much. There are a lot of jerks and stutters, and one time, when the car stops for a couple minutes, I hear a lot of shouting. I force one eye open and find Thane and Milo gone. Panicked, I lean out to search for them, only to find them—and a bunch of other passengers—actually *pushing* the car up the track. I keep my eyes open long enough for Thane and Milo to return to their spots, and then clamp them shut again.

Two stops later, as the car slowly climbs up a hill, I feel a warmth on my cheek just before Milo whispers, "You're going to miss the best part."

Despite my fear, I force my eyes open. For a second, Milo fills my vision. Then he leans back and reveals the view. We're at an intersection at the high point of a hill. Straight in front of me is a narrow street leading steeply down to a wider one, full of light and lanterns and activity. It's beautiful.

I smile at Milo for making me open my eyes.

I smile even bigger when he smiles back.

At the next stop, Milo's hand wraps around mine and tugs me to my feet. We've survived. Next time, I'll keep my eyes open the whole time.

"This is the world-famous Chinatown," he says, still holding my hand as he leads me down a very steep street.

My heart is racing, and not just because of the harrowing ride.

"And this," he says, pulling up in front of a glass storefront full of hanging meats and birds and unidentifiable things, "is the world's best dim sum parlor."

Although I can sort of see through the windows, they have layers of dirt caked at the corners, as if every so often someone grabs a rag to wipe only the centers. It doesn't exactly scream Great Place to Eat. Or even No Health Code Violations.

Milo throws the door open wide, flashes me a brilliant grin, and says, "Wait until you taste it."

Shoving my hesitations about the sanitary conditions aside, I follow Thane through the door and to a once-white Formica table with chipped edges. I take the seat opposite Thane, which means that—deep breath—Milo is sitting next to me. My blood is pounding in my ears, and I have to make the hostess repeat her request three times before I finally hear her ask, "Hot tea?"

"Yes, please," I say, ducking to hide my blush.

"No menus?" Thane asks.

"Not with dim sum," Milo explains. "The waiters will bring around trays of dishes, and if we see any we like, we get them." He spins a small piece of paper beneath his finger. "They stamp this order sheet to keep track of what we eat."

"Sounds complicated," I manage.

"It's great," Milo promises with a wink.

I’m not so sure. But when the first trayful of goodies comes by, my mouth waters at the wonderful smells. It’s like I never even ate dinner.

“Barbecue pork buns are the best,” Milo says, pointing to a metal tin containing three puffy white balls of dough. “Just don’t eat the paper stuck to the bottom.”

The waiter sets the tin on our table, pulls a stamp from his apron, and marks a symbol onto our order ticket.

“Oh,” I say, eyeing the pork buns. “I, um—”

“Grace is vegetarian,” Thane explains, so I don’t have to.

Milo gives me a serious look. Great, now he thinks I’m some kind of hippie-granola weirdo. No, I’m just eco-conscious and doing my part to lighten my footprint. I wave a mental good-bye to my very slim chance with him.

But then he says, “Why didn’t you say something?”

He calls the waiter back over, and soon there is a tin of doughy buns—these filled with barbecued veggies—sitting next to the pork.

“Thanks,” I say, and then drop my gaze to the food. Cute and considerate. As if Milo weren’t already my dream guy.

It takes only a quick tutorial from Milo for me to manage the chopsticks well enough to pick up my bun and lift it to my mouth.

“Uh-oh,” he says, as I’m about to take a bite. He reaches toward me and, for a heartbeat, I think he’s going to touch my cheek. Instead, he peels a thin piece of waxed paper off the bottom of my veggie bun. “Trust me, this does not add to the experience.”

I laugh at his teasing comment, but inside, my heart is doing cartwheels. *Play it cool, Grace.* Don’t want him to think I’m totally boy-illiterate.

As if I’m totally together, I lift the bun the rest of the way to my mouth and am about to bite in when a repulsive smell washes over me.

Instant nausea.

I clap my free hand over my mouth as the bun drops and rolls, forgotten, to the floor.

Milo asks, “What’s wrong?”

“Grace?” Thane’s jaw clenches into a block of stone. “What is it?”

If I weren’t on the verge of heaving the remains of Mom’s veggie stew, I’d appreciate Thane’s protectiveness. He’s always been that way, ready to

throw himself into anything if he thinks I'm in danger. But then I guess that's what big brothers are for.

At this moment, though, it's all I can do to keep my stomach contents where they belong. I close my eyes and shake my head.

"We should go," Thane says.

Milo nods. "You get her outside and I'll pay the bill."

"No," I whisper, swallowing down the nausea as best I can. I don't want to ruin this night. "I'm—I'll be fine. Just give me a—"

The front door to the restaurant opens with a whine and the stench hits me tenfold. I feel my eyes roll back as my body tries to reject the smell. Or to protect me from whatever's causing it. I've never had such a violent reaction to an odor before.

"Maybe we should—" I force my eyes open, but instead of Milo's adorable face or my brother's strong one, my gaze focuses on the *thing* that has just walked in the front door. The creature.

The body looks like a normal man, with arms and legs and everything in between. The head, though. . . . It's the head of a bull.

I'm not joking. A man with the head of a bull has just walked into an all-night dim sum restaurant as if it were normal.

I look at Thane for reassurance, hoping the panic I'm feeling shows in my eyes, telling him everything he needs to know. He turns to look at the door then back at me, jaw clenched and eyes wide. "Let's go."

I nod.

"What's going on?" Milo turns and looks too. "Do you two know that guy?"

"Guy?" I choke. Is he blind? Can't he see?

For that matter, can't everyone see? Why isn't anyone screaming or running away? Slowly, I scan the rest of the tables. No one else seems to have taken notice of the man-bull, who is now crossing the main floor and heading for the back room.

I look at Thane, certain he must have seen it.

But no, the look in his eyes now is simply concern for me. Did I just imagine the look of recognition I saw a moment ago? Milo doesn't see it, and neither does Thane. No one does. I'm the only person who saw a slobbering beast instead of a man.

Which can only mean one thing.

“I’m just—” I shake my head. “I don’t feel great.”

Both boys nod, as if it’s totally normal and logical and not at all out of the ordinary, when it’s anything but. There’s only one possible explanation for this hallucination. I must be going crazy.

About the Author

Photograph by Amy K. Smith

TERA LYNN CHILDS is the award-winning author of several books for teens, including the first two books in the Sweet Venom series, the mermaid romances *Forgive My Fins*, *Fins Are Forever*, and *Just for Fins*, as well as another mythology-inspired series, including *Oh. My. Gods*. and *Goddess Boot Camp*. Although Tera always dreamed of discovering a secret twin (or triplet), she is sad to report she remains an only child. Find extras—such as excerpts and cool contests—for all of Tera's books at www.teralynnchilds.com.

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ISBN 978-0-06-231056-9
EPub Edition © October 2013 ISBN 9780062310569

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

First Edition

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HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
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Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
http://www.harpercollins.com.au

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* There is a rumored thirteenth power: CHRONOPORTATION—The ability to travel through time. Outlawed by the gods millennia before man invented the clock.